

The Wrath of Dark Alchemy

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Summary: /Discontinued/ Six years have passed since Alchemy's release, and Weyard has descended into the predicted era of war and strife. After centuries of waiting, the equal and opposite force of Alchemy makes its move in preparation of its unleashing upon the land to bring about the darkest of ages.

***Chapter 1*: Chapter 1**

The Wrath of Dark Alchemy.

Infiltration: The Beginning of the End

The golden sun had long since set.

As the sky darkened and slowly lost what little light the moon could give, a bitter icy chill began to settle in the air of the forest of Lunpa. There did not appear to be any wind, however, only an uncomfortably perpetual coldness of the night. With the ominous looking trees obscuring the view of the sky, it seemed impossible to successfully walk the long, snaking trail that was a traveler's only hope of successfully navigating the long gloom of the woods.

This monstrous labyrinth of demonic looking trees, seemingly waiting to seize and devour unsuspecting travelers, was fittingly situated between the perverse, feared settlement of Lunpa, and the rest of the continent of Angara. Bordering the town on the opposite side of the woodland were massive mountains, making the forest the only way to go to and from Lunpa. Those who had been brave enough to seek Lunpa during the past six years by entering this forest had either been killed, or had returned deeply distressed, carrying demons of the mind.

A sudden cold wind swept through the forest, swaying the leaves of the trees, providing one of the few sounds to be heard on this silent night. Every now and then, a growl or a hiss would be heard from the unknown number of animals and monsters that dwelled in the forest. A fearful man would consider these signs of hunger, or a warning to those who would dare trespass on their territory. But in truth, the creatures were frightened beyond all belief. Though lacking

the ability to form in their brains images of unspeakable nightly demons and devils as humans could, the creatures of the forest could sense with their ingrained instinct that something abnormal was approaching them. Something that by its very existence spoke of insurmountable iniquity...

Soon, all was silent, save for the wind that seemed to grow colder and stronger by the second, as two darkly cloaked figures made their way through the forest. Neither spoke a word or even passed a glance toward each other as they made their way to their destination without a single uncertain step.

The flames of the torches adorning both sides of the Lunpa gate crackled, casting dim shadows along the wall that barred unauthorized entrance to the town behind it.

Donpappa shivered, and tried to move closer to one of the torches, but the icy chill of the night made it hard, if not impossible, to enjoy what little warmth the torches offered. He shivered not only from the icy chill, but from his fear of the dark.

He knew it was ridiculous that he had held onto such a childish fear. He had trained himself to be a soldier, and Donpappa knew that he had experienced things far more terrifying than the harmless dark of the night.

But as he stood before the gates that defended his hometown, his mind would eventually invariably imagine something in the darkness just a few yards away, where the torchlight couldn't reach, watching and waiting for his only source of light to disappear.

He hated feeling so helpless, but there was nothing he could do about it except attempt to move past it. After all, there

were far worse and much more real things to fear. And for this young soldier, nothing could be any worse than the man he had once considered to be his father, Dodonpa.

The mere thought of his father made Donpappa clench his fists in anger, helping him to momentarily forget his fear. Since the unfortunate passing of his grandfather, the noble Donpa, his father had instantly gone back on his word to become a better man and learn from prior mistakes. Callous brigands under Dodonpa's rule once again seized control of the town, just as they had during the kidnapping of Hammet, the lord of Kalay.

Donpappa had watched his beloved home crumble before his eyes every day for nearly two years until he had become of age to be a soldier. He had then begun to use his newfound authority to secretly help willing families escape from the tyrannical reign of his father, and had sent them on their way to freedom... or so he had hoped. He had known from the very beginning how risky these plans were, for him and the escaping townspeople, but it was not until he had actually been caught that he regretted ever even trying to be a hero...

The heavy wooden door was covered in blood, and Donpappa felt a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. He had never been in this corridor before, but he immediately knew where he was. The soldiers that had captured him were leading him to the torture chamber, where the sounds of screams were often heard throughout the fortress. Terrifying thoughts filled his head as they pushed the door open and held it open for him to walk through. Was his father going to subject him to whatever had made its previous victims scream so painfully? As he looked around at his new surroundings, he flinched at the sight.

As far as Donpappa knew, this chamber had only recently been set up as a means of frightening the townspeople, yet it looked as though it had been in use for years. Frightening looking contraptions lay around the room, and bloody corpses littered the floor. The smell of rotting flesh was sickening and Donpappa felt a wave of nausea wash over him. He couldn't understand why they had left the bodies to rot the way they did. It was just so needlessly cruel.

Standing in the middle of the room, apparently unaffected by the horrors around him, was his father, Dodonpa.

"I never thought my own son would betray me," Dodonpa said, and Donpappa could swear he heard a slight tinge of regret behind his contemptuous tone. "Have you no respect for the man who brought you into this world?"

Donpappa summoned what little defiance he had left and looked away, ignoring the question, only to feel a fist sink into his stomach. He doubled over as saliva flew from his gaping mouth to the ground.

"Don't turn away from me when I am talking to you! Now look at me!"

Donpappa complied, and his father spoke, "I must admit that you have surprised me. I wouldn't have thought you capable of betraying me while continuing to walk the halls of this fortress. But unfortunately for you, your stupidity blinded you to the true situation at hand. Did you forget that I warned not only you but everyone working beneath me that I had spies watching your every move?"

Donpappa didn't answer, feeling like an icy hand had gripped his heart. His face betrayed his hope of concealing his fear, and his father shook his head with a look of what he thought was pity. "Did you really think you were a hero

all this time? Well, take a good look at what your heroism had led to." Dodonpa gestured to the bodies strewn on the floor and hanging from chains. Donpappa had guessed the result ahead of time, but that did nothing to prepare him for the sight of the lifeless bodies of the desperate people he had tried to save. People who had given up on life and had found hope in his generosity. Now their faces were frozen in agony that they wouldn't have been made to experience if not for him.

"As you can see, you didn't save a single soul. Maybe this will teach you not to take my laws lightly."

Donpappa looked back at his father with the harshest look he could muster. Dodonpa glared back at him and spoke, his voice a malicious hiss, "What is that? Are you trying to frighten me? You think I'm intimidated by you?"

Donpappa didn't answer, and Dodonpa suddenly unsheathed his sword and tossed it to the floor in front of Donpappa, the clang of the sword echoing through the chamber. "You think you're better than me?" Dodonpa spat. "Do you think for one second that this town can survive without me? Then pick the sword up and prove it."

Donpappa didn't move, refusing to give in to his father's demand, and simply stared at him contemptibly. Dodonpa leered and raised one fist. "You know something? I hate it when you look at me like that... like you're important enough to look at me with disrespect. I see it all the time..." With full force, he slammed his fist into Donpappa's left cheek and he fell to the floor. Donpappa tasted blood as cringed in pain, covering his cheek with his hand as if to soothe the ache.

"I don't ever want to see you look at me like that again. When you look at me like that, you challenge me, and you'd better believe I'm going to rise to that challenge. When you learn to respect me, you will receive it in turn. Until that day, you will only ever have my pity."

"Save it for yourself..."

Dodonpa's face contorted with rage. His words were shaking uncontrollably with fury. "What did you say to me?"

Donpappa, having had more than enough and seething with rage, looked up to face the man who was responsible for the hell that was his life. For a second, Donpappa could see fear in his father's eyes at the incensed expression he knew he must have on his face, filling him with an almost aggressive prideful feeling that he'd never felt before. With these feelings, he acidly spoke, "I told you to save your pity for yourself! Do you think I'm the only one who hates you? Everybody does! I've never wanted your approval and I'll never want it!"

With that final scream, he lunged at his father, and sank his own fist into his father's stomach. But the punch seemed only to anger Dodonpa as he raised his fist and slammed it into his son's face. Donpappa felt blinding pain as the sickening crack of his nose breaking entered his ears. He felt himself stumbling backwards, feeling blood flowing freely from his nose, before he collapsed onto the crimson floor, his sense of pride now in tatters.

With a livid look on his face, Dodonpa walked to his son's body and began to deliver swift, painful kicks to his stomach, accompanied by indistinguishable screams of fury.

Donpappa's screams of pain echoed through the halls of the fortress, like those of earlier torture victims before

disappearing.

He had pushed himself to let go of his shame and guilt of what had happened on that day, but the memory would forever haunt him. After that day, he had been dismissed as a soldier of Lunpa and exiled by Dodonpa, who had said he was too disgusted to kill him himself.

However, thanks to his mother and sister, Donpappa had managed to secretly reside in Lunpa for about a week before leaving with them both and helping them escape aboard a boat on the Karagol Sea bound for Tolbi, promising that he would find and bring the both of them back once he had found a way to overthrow Dodonpa. From then on, he had begun living outside of the walls of his town, attempting to better his skills as a swordsman. It was all he could have hoped to do at the time, having no real plan to fight his father's reign.

But as his self-training continued, events were unfolding all around him. A systematic series of attacks by Lunpa on all neighboring towns had begun, occurring so quickly that every town was caught off guard by the attack. Soon after, the trading industry that the city of Kalay had built itself upon was brought to an abrupt halt as a result of Dodonpa's sudden attack, throwing the city into a panic within weeks. The growing anger of the city towards Lunpa finally reached its boiling point when the beloved Lady Layanna was killed in her sleep by an unknown assailant. The blame immediately fell on Lunpa, and Lord Hammet had ordered a counterattack.

The attempt to bring Dodonpa to justice failed, however, and the enraged Lunpa lord struck back with a full on assault on the opposing city. The brutal battle had ended

with the surrender of Kalay. The conquest of the prosperous city had been a horrible blow to all who wished to see Dodonpa fall. And it had only been the beginning.

The villagers of Vale had been attacked while rebuilding their beloved town which had been destroyed by the unexplained collapse of the famed Mt. Aleph one year earlier. The plans for the town's full reconstruction had tragically never come to fruition, and the villagers had been forced to make do with what little they had to this day. Vault and Altin had been spared from destruction, but were still losing provisions to Lunpa every day. The people of Kolima, however, had not been so lucky, and their town had been burned to the ground after a vicious raid. Xian had put up a fight against Lunpa, and the battle had ended with the town becoming an abandoned ruin site, and the last survivors escaping into nearby forests, their fates unknown. Things only grew worse when Lord McCoy of Bilibin was killed during an attack on the town, and the strong army of Bilibin was willingly merged with Lunpa's army.

Without Kalay's strength, the only hope for Angara was widely considered to be the Tolbi naval force, which had been set up during the war and was winning the battles against Lunpa and Kalay on the Karagol. But it was only a matter of time before the focused attacks on the area would take their toll on Tolbi's ships.

Donpappa had heard historical accounts of vicious battles in the past, but he wondered if any had ever been as horrid as the one Weyard was now enduring. He'd heard many townspeople of Lunpa speak of the war as a sign of the approaching end of the world, but he'd never believed it. In fact, in spite of all that had happened, he still didn't believe it, and not because of the optimism or positive ideals that Dodonpa had hated. He simply didn't think that the

stupidity of people was enough to bring about the world's end, especially when even during these times he had seen the good people could do, and how harshly it contrasted with their worst. The world was not completely lost in hatred yet. He had to believe that, or he'd have no reason to try and help it.

Suddenly, his troubled thoughts were interrupted by a distant sound.

Looking up, he saw someone watching him from the trees. He was surprised at first, but upon recognizing the figure, he immediately gave a nod of silent confirmation, signaling his identity as the "contact", as he had been called for this operation he had managed to arrange. With that, a Kalay soldier emerged and approached him.

A Kalay spy had recently entered the fortress with Donpappa's help, disguised as a Lunpa soldier, and was currently standing guard of the secret Lunpa gate. The spy had been part of a small group that had deserted Kalay. Bound by their desire to keep their families safe from harm, most of Kalay's soldiers served Dodonpa without question. Those who either never had or no longer had families to protect in Kalay had abandoned the city and headed for Lunpa with plans for a suicide attack to cause as much damage to Lunpa as possible. However, by chance the group's forward scout had come across Donpappa, who had instead enlisted their help to perform a desperate gambit of his own devising, one that would hopefully avoid any harm coming to the innocent townspeople.

The group's scout spoke quietly as he neared the young man. "Is everything ready?"

Donpappa nodded. "He is guarding the secret Lunpa gate in that cave." At this, he pointed to the cave that led to the city. "Tell him when you're ready, and he'll let you in."

The man nodded. "All right. The others are on their way. We'll be waiting for them. Let them know. We'll move in together when they arrive. Got it?"

The Lunpa heir nodded and then looked to the ground in contemplation as the man swiftly ran toward the cave and disappeared within the dark tunnels. Even now, Donpappa was not sure how to feel about what he was planning. He had betrayed his father to these soldiers, and though he could not say he loved his father, he also could not help but feel sympathy for him. He had never known his past, but he supposed something terrible must have happened to him at some point in his life to turn him into such a terrible person. He liked to believe that nobody was ever born with a path of evil laid out for them to follow.

He was still thinking deeply when a sound once again interrupted his thoughts. The noise was very faint at first, but it gradually seemed to get louder. Listening closely, he realized that it was somebody's whispering voice.

For a second, Donpappa's earlier feeling of hope had vanished, replaced with fear. His mind was once again plagued with thoughts of demons hiding in the shadows. But he immediately pushed the thought away, remembering what the soldier had told him to do.

With that in mind, he prepared to meet the soldiers, but stopped suddenly, gripped with fear, as he saw two dark figures, both clad in cloaks, emerge from the forest. Behind them, Donpappa noticed the group of about seven soldiers following them. None of them seemed to notice him. He was

tempted to call out to them, but there was something unsettling about those cloaked figures. So much so that he felt compelled to remain silent. Donpappa watched as they walked toward and entered the cave before following them stealthily. A feeling inside told him to stay away, but he ignored it and continued on.

As he walked into the cave, an unpleasant feeling came over him. It was very dim and silent, and the dripping sounds of water from the ceiling echoed off the walls. The footsteps were ahead now and fading. It seemed they were not wasting any time. As he continued through the cave, he stopped as he heard whispering voices, once again, and strained to hear what was being said.

And suddenly, his blood went cold as he heard the sounds of someone screaming. All manner of worst-case scenarios flooded Donpappa's mind at once. Had they been found out? Had they been betrayed? Had they even had a chance of succeeding from the beginning?

But as quickly as it had begun, it was over. He heard the sounds of walking again. Either the small group of soldiers had all been slaughtered in seconds, which Donpappa thought was very unlikely, or else... what? He didn't know. But he couldn't just stay where he was. He had to know the truth, as horrifying as it would undoubtedly be.

He began walking again, trying to move quickly while also trying to keep silent. He reached a turn, and he knew that the gate was around the corner.

Suddenly, out of the darkness, a strange unknown sound was heard, followed by a lone scream of fright, which immediately changed to a scream of pain. Unable to take

anymore, Donpappa ran around the corner to see what had occurred.

The soldiers of Kalay all stood in front of the gate, silent and unmoving. Beside them, a figure cloaked in black was watching the gate. As Donpappa wondered where the other mysterious figure was, he heard the sound of the gate opening from the other side. When it had rose to touch the ceiling of the cave, he saw a man cloaked in a dark blue standing near the gate switch, as well as the spy he had left in charge of opening of the gate on the floor, clutching his left leg, which Donpappa saw had been stabbed. Somehow, the man in blue had gotten across to the other side of the gate without opening it first. But how?

But Donpappa pushed his contemplations away as the man wreathed in azure suddenly began kicking the man repeatedly, forcing him to roll away. He stopped kicking as the soldier rolled beneath the gate. Without warning, the gate fell, but stopped suddenly just inches above the man's throat, having been stopped by the switch.

The soldier stared at him with fearful eyes, and Donpappa felt a wave of dread wash over him as he heard a cruel laugh on the other side of the gate. The gate fell, and Donpappa turned away as a sickening sound was heard. The gate was heard ascending again, and this time, there was no sound from the man. He had been decapitated.

Donpappa was so shocked by the brutal murder that he was only dimly aware of how badly his body was shaking with rage. But his anger was secondary to his growing fear of the murderer, whose icy smile could be seen. The young boy felt utterly sick, not just at the guard's pitiful death, but at the realization that a *human* was committing such intolerable acts, and was... smiling about them.

Or perhaps it wasn't a human? Perhaps this was the demon that Donpappa had feared was lurking in the night, come to bring this town even more pain than it had already suffered. Not even his father could be compared to this psychotic being, for he had never laughed or had ever even been the slightest bit amused at the prospect of killing fellow humans, brutal and hate-filled though he was.

Without a word, the soldiers began walking in unison through the gate, stepping over the body of the decapitated man.

Just as Donpappa started to follow, the man who had murdered the spy suddenly turned around and looked straight at him. "And where do you think you are going?"

Donpappa felt his blood go cold again as the other cloaked figure turned abruptly towards him. He instinctively raised his spear, preparing for a fight. He examined both of them as he waited.

"You expect to kill us with that? Oh, do entertain me." It was the man cloaked in blue that had spoken.

Donpappa clenched his teeth. "You don't scare me..."

A cold laugh was heard and the voice spoke again in a mocking tone that Donpappa had already grown to despise. "Oh, do we not? Let's see if we can alter that problem..."

He hesitated, and the next second the blue-cloaked figure raised his left hand with his palm facing Donpappa.

One moment, the young guard was staring ahead, filled with a terror he could not explain, and the next, he felt what could only be icy cold-water shoot from the ground below him with the force of a geyser, sending his body crashing

into the ceiling of the cave. When he landed back on the ground, he could only lie there in pain and alarm for a few moments. Sitting up and wincing, he looked around in utter shock, but could find no sign of where the water could have come from, if indeed that was what it had been. When he finally managed to get to his feet, he looked up to see his attacker smiling gleefully, simply standing still and waiting for him to make the next move.

With a yell of anger, the young soldier raised his spear above his head and prepared to fling it at the man.

"Dark Frost."

The spear was thrown, but instead of stabbing the man, it smacked a pillar of what appeared to be ice that had materialized from the floor from a small pool of water on the ground, snapping in two. The morphing of the object from the water was the only clue that it was ice, for the pillar was pure black in color, rather than a shimmering blue and white. The pillar seemed to melt away and return to a simple puddle upon the ground.

The man smiled. "Are you frightened yet?"

His anger returning, Donpappa pulled his own sword from his sheath and charged. He feinted to the left, and then lunged to stab him. The sword hit another pillar of black ice that had been spawned too quickly for his attack. The impact caused Donpappa to drop his sword and scream as he felt an explosion of pain in his hand caused by the recoil.

Once again, the pillar melted into water. The man had not even moved. "I pity you. Even if I was not being aided by my power, you are a terrible warrior."

The figure in blue raised his hand again and Donpappa screamed as an invisible blast of some kind of power sent him flying backwards, crashing into the rocky wall behind him and falling back to the ground, beaten.

"How typical of you so-called soldiers," the azure man spoke with a bored tone. "You talk like heroes to those who are weak and dependent upon you, but in the face of real strength, all you can do is talk."

Through his numb shock, Donpappa felt like screaming in opposition to such a false accusation, but he stopped himself when he heard the other man's voice.

"Enough. You are wasting time." There was no mocking tone, anger, or any trace of humor in his voice.

His senses somewhat regained, Donpappa turned to look where the voice had come from, and saw the other man cloaked in black, standing against the wall by a torch, illuminating what little could be seen under his hood. Donpappa immediately felt a sense of recognition as he heard the man's voice. He had seen this person before, but he did not remember when or where. Plus, the lack of suitable light made it hard for Donpappa to see his face from how far away he was. The man in black began walking toward him as the azure man sighed and began to walk towards the cave exit.

Donpappa picked up his sword with his other hand, awaiting an attack from the approaching man.

The cloaked man raised his left hand and uttered something that Donpappa could just barely hear...

"Dark Curse."

The last thing the young guard felt was a burning pain spreading through his being. The last thing he saw was the cave before his vision was obscured by blackness. And the last thing he heard was his own screaming as the pain overwhelmed him. It consumed him, and he felt like he was falling into a long tunnel of everlasting shadow...

It was just as dark, silent and cold in the town of Lunpa as it was outside of the gates. Those who were patrolling the town felt no safety within the gates, though they did not know why.

The only sounds were the croaking of frogs in the well of the ghost town, and a quiet conversation between a trio of brigands patrolling the village, two with green cloaks, and one with an orange one.

"I'm telling you, I heard screams in that cave," one of the green-cloaked men said with a hint of fear in his voice.

"I don't care," retorted the one in orange. "You know that the gate can't be opened, so even if there is someone in there, they aren't getting through. Let them rot for all I care."

"How do we know we won't be betrayed again?" the other thief replied worriedly. "We didn't think Dodonpa's kid would have the spine for it, but he still did it."

"Let's just go and see already," said the third thief. "It wouldn't be the first time that intruders snuck into the town, you know. Besides, we have an extra shift out here and I don't fancy the thought of being stabbed on my watch."

"Correction, *you* have an extra shift out here," the orange-cloaked man snapped. "*I'm* going back to the fortress and going to sleep."

There was a grim silence that followed his words as he turned and walked off to the north, where the fortress of Lunpa was situated.

As soon as he was out of earshot, one of the brigands turned to the other and growled, "What the hell is his problem? Is a whole two minutes of searching really that much work for him?"

The other thief spoke in a much more reserved voice. "Forget it. He'd probably be the first to run away if we found something anyway. Now let's just go look in that cave."

The two green-cloaked men walked to the west of town where the cave entrance. When they arrived at the stairs that led into the dark abyss that was the Lunpa cave, they both shivered as they heard the wind whistle through the cave, creating an almost ghostly sound.

"After you," one said grimly. The other made sure to discreetly keep one of his hands on his sword's sheath as he led the way into the long blackness.

No one heard the screams echo through the cave just a few seconds later.

The orange-cloaked thief walked through the tunnels of the Lunpa fortress. He had been ordered at the last minute to report on the current status of the fortress, which had made him angry, but he wasn't going to contradict Dodonpa. Anyone who did was rarely seen by the following morning. By now, he had to have passed about five guards sleeping on the job; there was definitely a good chance an intruder could be walking around undetected.

Idiots, he thought. They'd all be sent to the dungeon if Dodonpa found out...

He'd definitely report this to the Lunpa lord, if only to rid himself of worthless bottom feeders like them, and he wouldn't lose an ounce of sleep because of it. Though the thieves and soldiers of Dodonpa worked together, it was common knowledge that they were an army that prided themselves on surviving through betrayal and greed, not cooperation. A nest of insects took better care of each other than the thieves of Lunpa. Each one of them was constantly waiting for the right moment to strike at each other, if it meant more food for them at the end of the day.

But those thoughts faded and were replaced by anxiety when he heard footsteps behind. He turned around; the hall was dimly lit and the guard was still asleep.

He turned around and continued walking, when he heard the footsteps again, along with low breathing. Now he was sure someone was following him, and there was more than one.

He turned again, and nearly yelled. As he observed the group, he spotted both his partner thieves and behind them, the guard of the corridor was finally awake, grinning as he stood by their side. And behind him, all the other guards that he had thought were sleeping were now awake, and the shocked thief immediately knew they had tricked him by pretending to be asleep, for some unknown reason. As the group stepped into the light of the torches, the thief's eyes widened in fear as he saw their faces.

Their faces were almost the same as before, but the one aspect that shocked him into a stunned silence was their

eyes. They were now as black as the night sky, completely devoid of all color, leaving no sign of their pupils.

The brigand stared in shock, unable to speak as he saw the thieves' unnatural eyes and horrifying grins. And suddenly, they took one step towards him, stepping at the same time, causing the lone thief to pull his blade out.

With no sign of fear, the group just stared. "Would you really kill your only friends? Or perhaps, they are not your friends? After all, nobody cares about each other here, right?"

It didn't take long for the horror-struck thief to realize that not only were they saying these words at the exact same time, but the voices, or voice, coming from their mouths were not their own. An entirely different voice was being emitted from each thief.

But before he could say or do anything, he heard the voice say two words,

"Dark Curse."

He didn't even get a chance to grasp what was just said, because in the next second, unbearable pain clouded his every thought, and he knew no more.

The Lunpa dungeons were filled with the smell of decay and death. Bodies littered the floor of this place and blood stained the walls.

An unholy place of death.

Yet the dead, regretfully tortured and slain by the ones in control of the decaying town, would now receive a chance for retribution.

A voice echoed softly through the death chamber.

"Dark Restoration..."

Ghostly groans and angered growls now filled the chamber, but an insidious command could still be heard throughout the room...

"Consume."

A Lunpa soldier rubbed his eyes, trying to keep himself awake. Guards were missing and he had heard a scream, but Dodonpa had told him to stay where he was, telling him he would bring help momentarily. But the soldier was no fool. Dodonpa couldn't care less what happened to him, or anyone else for that matter. All he was concerned with was saving his own skin, and he would sacrifice every one of his personal soldiers to do it if he had to.

And yet, he had let the self-serving lord walk right by him into the inner chambers of the fortress without a word. The thief had decided some time ago that he no longer cared what happened to him. He wasn't especially old, but he was tired and weakened by all the fighting and pain he had experienced. His only motivation for continuing the charade that was now his life was the hope of seeing Dodonpa fall.

He was about to surrender to his exhaustion when a strange groaning sound was heard. He opened his eyes and saw a figure at the end of the dark corridor he was facing.

What the hell was that? He thought to himself. The groan was unlike anything he had ever heard.

The figure walked strangely, more like a stagger than a walk. Looking closely, the thief saw the figure move into another

corridor on the left.

And what was that other sound? It sounded like dripping water, or some sort of liquid.

He took a breath and followed the figure. As he walked down the dim hallway towards the other corridor on the left, he stopped as he heard a groan again. This time, he felt a bit scared. That sound... it sounded so sad and forlorn, almost ghostly and inhuman. But that was not the only thing that bothered the anxious man... looking at the floor the figure had been walking on, he saw that there was a crimson trail of blood. The figure was bleeding profusely.

He swallowed hard as he heard the person moan again, louder this time.

And now a terrible smell filled his nose. Strange... like the smell of decay. Like the dungeon of Lunpa, the man thought, where the bodies of villagers were left after they were tortured and murdered. Shivering violently, he had a feeling that he didn't want to enter the corridor the figure had walked into, but he couldn't stop now. Gripping his sword so that his knuckles were white, he took a last breath, peeked around the corner...

And neither saw or heard anything. The corridor was empty, but a long trail of blood led to another path that the soldier knew would lead to a dead-end. Forgetting his fear, the thief ran down the corridor following the blood, anxious to find the figure and finally uncover what in the world was going on. He turned the last corner...

And there it was. The figure stood in the shadows, out of the torchlight, facing him. It seemed to be moving slightly from left to right, looking like it had a problem keeping itself upright.

"Who are you...?"

The figure stood still for a second, and then walked forward into the light. As the thief saw the figure's face, his sword dropped with a clang. The thief's face was twisted with disgust and fear as he looked upon the face of a man he himself had been forced to kill. The undead man moaned again, and this time there was a touch of anger to it as he lumbered towards the thief.

The frightened man rapidly stepped backward, slipping as he did and falling to the floor. Blood dripped from the undead man's body. The smell of rotting flesh was more apparent and overwhelming than ever. The thief wanted to run, but the multiple groans he now heard from the hallway behind him told him it was useless.

"I... I'm s-sorry..." It was all he could think to say as he watched it slowly approach him.

The zombie stood before its cowering killer and opened its grotesque, rotted mouth to moan sadly once more. The moan slowly became a hiss, and the undead creature proceeded to enact its revenge...

Dodonpa ran towards the main cell of the fortress, the lair of the monster of Lunpa. He had not set foot in the cell for a long time now as it brought back unpleasant memories of the weeks he had spent in there on his father's orders. But now, having just heard the screams echoing through the fortress, he knew there was no safer place to hide. He was not particularly worried about it; Lunpa had survived many battles in the past after all. And with trained soldiers and Toadonpa to guard him, he knew there was not much for him to personally worry about.

But he couldn't shake the feeling of fear deep down inside of him. That man had promised him he would not be hurt throughout this war. But now, Dodonpa wished he hadn't made that bargain.

"Who are you?" Dodonpa inquired of the man standing in his quarters as if he owned it. He was wrapped in a blue cloak, and his face was hidden by a hood. Equally blue strands of hair ran down his concealed face.

"That is not important," He answered.

"Like hell it isn't!" Dodonpa roared. "Nobody just waltzes in here!"

"My lord, with all due respect, I must ask you to shut your mouth before you anger me." The man said coldly.

Dodonpa regarded the man silently for a moment before speaking in a self-assured tone. "You're either very brave or very stupid, insulting me right here in my fortress. But either way, I'll make you wish you'd just stayed home." He turned around and began to stride towards the door.

The man scoffed. "Oh, trust me, I already wish that, rather than have to deal with a cowardly bottom-feeder like you."

Dodonpa whirled around and felt ready to lunge at the man himself, but stopped when he spoke once more. "But I am here to offer you a deal."

Dodonpa froze. "What deal?"

"One that involves using your power and wealth to spread your influence as the ruler of Lunpa further than you've ever thought possible."

Dodonpa chuckled to himself. He had dealt with people like this before. Merchants and business men from nearby towns and faraway cities had attempted to create deals designed to stab him in the back while they took a portion of his wealth, foolishly thinking he would not be able to see through their charades. All had failed, and this one would be no different. He decided to humor the man a bit longer to see how he would go about this so-called deal.

"In other words, you want to help me take over Weyard," Dodonpa said, already smirking.

"Not necessarily. I am talking about taking it over myself, and allowing you to share a good deal of the power I will attain. You should be honored to be the human I ask for help."

Dodonpa's smirk was gone, replaced by a look of confusion. "Why are you talking like that? Are you not a human being as well?"

"No. I am something else entirely. Something that is far superior to humans."

Dodonpa began to feel a bit uneasy, but shrugged it off. This man was clearly suffering from some kind of delusion, but that made this more interesting. He was eager to see where this amusing story went. "If that's the case, then why did you say you were here for my help? Surely, the power you want can be obtained without us 'inferior' beings?"

"Indeed it could," The man said, a cool tone suddenly making itself apparent in his voice. "And it would be all too easy. However, it would also take long, and I am offering you the chance to speed up the process. And again, you will be acquiring a bit of the power I will gain in return. Anything you wish for will be yours."

"And how would I 'speed up' the process, as you put it?"

"By allowing me to use every one of your resources for my own use, and by that, I mean your fortress, your army, and your wealth."

Dodonpa burst out laughing. "I see. I must say, no one's ever been so blunt in their attempts to stab me in the back before. You're either delusional, or you came here with the intent to amuse me, at which you certainly succeeded in doing. I may just lighten your sentence for that." He began to walk towards the door.

"I must advise you not to try to summon any guards. You will greatly regret it."

Dodonpa turned around at these words, his face contorted with anger. "Are you threatening me?"

"Yes, I am."

Dodonpa glared as he turned around and pulled the door open. His personal guards were staring back at him with widened eyes, faces frozen in an expression of pain; both of their throats had been sliced by a blade and fresh blood was dripping from the wounds.

Whirling around, Dodonpa pulled a small, concealed blade from its sheath on his belt and turned to lunge at the man, but he was gone. He then felt a fist strike his back. Pain exploded through his body, and he screamed as he flew forward onto the floor, his dagger flying from his hand and landing several feet away from him.

"How...?"

"I warned you... do you wish to continue?"

Dodonpa stared at him fearfully. This man's voice was icy and menacing. "Alright... take whatever you want... I don't care, just take it and leave..."

"That is enough cowering. I did not come here to rob you. As I have said, I am willing to share a bit of the power I will gain with you. No one but the weak would refuse this chance. As I understand it, many have believed you to be weak since your business with the merchant Hammet. Well, now is your chance to shatter that image. I will help you to incite fear in your people once more, and make your enemies wish they had never angered you."

Dodonpa stared at the floor, thinking back. Indeed he had been stripped of all glory and pride since his fall at the hands of the mysterious quartet that had infiltrated his fortress. The people of Lunpa regarded him as a coward who feared the very mention of his father's name, and his father had begun a trade system between Lunpa and Kalay to make amends for Dodonpa's actions, so now Kalay's people no doubt called him a coward. Even his family looked upon him spitefully. His wife stared at him with disrespect, his parents with shame, his daughter with pity, and his son with contempt. And for the past year, he had simply accepted it all. He was no longer the ruler of Lunpa. He had just become a face for the people to point and laugh at while he followed his father's every whim. He felt his rage boil inside him and he clenched his fists so tightly that it hurt.

"And now that you have heard my request, I must ask a little favor of you."

Dodonpa looked up at the man, forgetting his growing rage for the moment, and seeing an expressionless look on his face. What could he possibly want from him now? "What favor?"

"Just your involvement in a quick experiment of mine."

"Experiment?"

The azure-cloaked man pulled back his heavy cloak to reveal a hidden sword in its sheath. He pulled the sword out of its sheath and threw it to the floor at Dodonpa's feet. Dodonpa didn't move.

"Now that you know what I plan to do and what I am capable of, I am going to give you the chance right now to kill me."

Dodonpa stared at him in bewilderment, unable to form a reply to the bizarre request.

"I am now unarmed, as you can see, and I do not plan on stopping you. I am sure you do not believe me, but I am just as vulnerable as you. Watch."

He knelt down to pick Dodonpa's small, fallen dagger and gave himself a tiny cut in the palm of his hand. A trickle of crimson began dripping from his hand to the floor and he tossed the dagger aside.

"Do you see?" The man suddenly hissed angrily. "This body is as weak as any other human body. I bleed, and I die, and I am at your mercy now."

Dodonpa still did not move, distrustful of the mysterious man. Even if what he had said before about being greater than a human was true, Dodonpa could tell that there was something he was not being told. The sight of his own blood seemed to be driving him crazy, a completely different persona to the calm, calculating person he had met just moments ago.

"Make your decision..." The azure man growled low in his throat, the hiss still apparent in his voice. "Kill me now... or doom the world you know in favor of one that you will help me to rule. A world where no one will ever disrespect you again. A leader's... no, a king's life, awaits you. Which world do you choose?"

The looks Dodonpa had seen from his family and people returned to his memory, and he turned to the man with a resolute look.

"I will help you. What do you need from me?"

The man grinned as he knelt to pick up his sword and place it in the sheath at his waist again. "Cut off all trade with Kalay first. I will also need you to donate considerable amounts of your wealth to help spread our influence. Then, you will attack and gain control of the town of Vault."

Dodonpa's face was stoic as he attempted not to show any fear. "My father will not allow me to halt our trade with Kalay..."

"The solution to that problem should be obvious. We all must learn to make sacrifices if we are to bring about a new world. I would suggest something subtle. You do not want to draw too much suspicion towards yourself in the wake of his death."

Dodonpa said nothing, and stared at the floor.

"I realize that you may be concerned with your safety in all of this. That is why I have already set up an invisible group of spies throughout your city who will serve as your eyes and ears. I can guarantee you that you will not be so much as touched as you carry out our plans."

Dodonpa looked up, his face suspicious. "You did what? If they are 'invisible', then how do I know you won't be sending them after me when I least expect it?"

"Risks must also always be taken to ensure a new world." The man said casually. "If you need persuasion, I advise you to look in the third cell of the fortress' dungeon. The group of people that was sneaking in here to kill you will need to eat soon, after all. And they were people of this town, no less, so I doubt you would have seen it coming were it not for us."

Dodonpa stayed silent again as the man began walking toward the door. "I expect very favorable reports when I return."

"When will that be?"

"I do not know, just as you do not. So you had best get started immediately."

With a swish of his cloak, the azure man casually strode through the open door and shut it behind him. Dodonpa rushed to the door and pulled it open, but the man was gone, and the open eyes of his soldiers' corpses stared back at him. Their empty glances almost looked accusing.

The Lunpa lord finally stopped running as he reached the cell, and found a group of six brigands there. Glaring at them all, he yelled, "What are you doing? Are you not hearing the fighting in the upper levels? Are you just going to stand here all night or are you going to move your worthless skins and fight?"

"We've already fought them as hard as we could!" One brigand said, with obvious indignation in his voice which

made Dodonpa glare. "The missing guards we reported have sided with the intruders! We've lost many men already, and they're heading this way now."

Dodonpa growled low in his throat before pulling out his blade. "Damn it... *damn it!* Then release Toadonpa and we'll take refuge in this cell. Let them all come and get their spines ripped out!"

"Yes, sir!"

One brigand ran towards the lever on the wall behind Dodonpa, but never got a chance to pull it. In one quick moment, he felt the stabbing pain of cold steel piercing his side and he was thrown against the nearest wall by an invisible force. He crumpled to the floor as he slowly began to bleed to death.

The thief's killer, a man in a black cloak, walked into the prison cell. He looked at the body of the now dead thief with the blade still in his side. He grabbed the hilt of the sword and pulled it out, the silver blade stained with blood. Disregarding this, he merely sheathed it and turned to the bewildered group at the opposite side of the room. He then walked toward the lever on the wall that would unleash the monster of Lunpa.

He reached and pulled it, and the wall behind Dodonpa and his bandits slid open. A deafening roar was heard and Dodonpa grinned.

"You don't even know what you've just done, do you? Toadonpa, attack!"

An answering roar was heard as the monster charged into the cell.

The Monster of Lunpa was indeed a suitable title for the appalling creature. As its darkly humorous name suggested, it was indeed a toad-like creature, but a huge monstrous one standing on its hind legs, transformed by an unknown force. Its skin was a scaly blue, with red spikes sticking out of the top of its head and down its back to the end of its tail. Huge clawed hands and feet with crimson nails, able to rip a man apart, were its organic weapons, not to mention its jagged teeth and its blood-red eyes, which had intimidated many of its victims with their hungrily insane gaze.

And yet, the cloaked man simply watched the monster get nearer to him, not even fidgeting in the slightest. As Toadonpa stopped in front of him, it swiftly lashed out with one of its claws with enough strength to behead the man. But the cloaked man dodged the creature's attack with ease by moving to the side, causing the monster to stumble forward, confused at the missed attack. The man then raised a hand and sent the monster flying into the cell wall with the invisible power he had used on his first victim. Toadonpa groaned as it began to pick itself up from the floor.

Shocked by how effortlessly the man had momentarily dispatched his monster, Dodonpa could only watch as the assailant spoke again, "*Dark Curse...*"

Dodonpa watched as the monster howled and screeched, twisting its body around on the floor in obvious agony. It was over in seconds, and when it stopped the monster slowly rose to its feet. With a low snarl, it raised its head and glared at Dodonpa and his thieves with completely black eyes.

To Dodonpa's horror, the monster charged towards them with a bloodcurdling shriek of rage. Toadonpa lashed out with its claw, pinning one of the thieves beneath it on the ground. It then lowered its head and clamped down on the

man's head with its horrifyingly sharp teeth, killing him instantly. The closest brigand screamed in shock, but was silenced by the monster's other claw, which sliced his throat with its sharpened nails.

A sudden icy voice added to the terror filling the room,

"Kill them all. Show no mercy."

Dodonpa looked at the bodies of his dead soldiers and into the black pits that were once Toadonpa's red eyes. Was his once faithful creature going to turn on him? He stumbled backwards away from it, waiting for another enraged attack, but nothing happened. Rather, the creature ceased its sudden attack and moved away from the surviving men, resting against the wall as it continued to growl.

The only sounds were footsteps coming from behind Dodonpa. He turned, and when he saw who was behind him, he knew that the shock he had received from seeing Toadonpa with a demon-like face was nothing compared to the shock he was feeling now. For before him, glaring at him with the same black demon eyes was his son, Donpappa.

"Go," said the voice.

Donpappa unsheathed his sword and assumed a battle stance, but Dodonpa didn't even move. He had harmed his son in the past without once thinking of repercussions, but now... he felt frozen with fear. The other thieves, however, raised their swords.

Donpappa charged at the remaining brigands and swung his sword at one. The thief parried and charged to stab him, only to be sidestepped by the young man, causing him to stumble. Donpappa then slashed the thief in the back, causing him to fall, gasping in pain. But his pain would soon

end as Donpappa stabbed him in the side, splattering the ground with blood. The thief groaned as the pain increased for just a few seconds before he passed into an endless sleep.

Two thieves charged at Donpappa from behind, but he performed a perfect back flip over the two. He then charged in between the stunned duo and sliced one in the side while kicking the other in the stomach. He proceeded to stab the already wounded fighter in the chest, thus ending his suffering like his fallen comrade. He turned to the other downed fighter, who grabbed his blade and swung at Donpappa's head. But he merely ducked and delivered a powerful kick to the thief's head, finishing him by stabbing him on the ground.

He then turned to his father, who had been watching in horrifying silence, and smiled.

"Are you pleased with me now, father?" he said, his voice cold with uncharacteristic malice. "You always wanted me to be a ruthless killer, didn't you?"

His father stared in paralyzed horror, speaking in a voice barely above a whisper. "What the hell are you...?"

Donpappa began to speak in a voice that was not his own. *"What we would call ourselves is irrelevant. You and your world would call us... demons. Monsters. Shadows."*

Dodonpa could only stare, now shaking uncontrollably with his fear.

Donpappa walked toward him and spoke again, and this time, his own voice escaped his mouth, "You have brought this on yourself. What you are feeling now is what I have felt

all my life. I feel no remorse. Prepare to depart from this world, *father...*"

From behind his son, Dodonpa saw the man in the blue cloak. He could just barely see his face beneath the hood. Strands of equally blue hair slightly covered his face, which was chillingly and impenitently smiling.

Realizing that his end was at hand and that he had been doomed from the start, Dodonpa, the once feared Lord of Lunpa, began to cry. Tears of sadness, rage, and fear flowed from his eyes as he awaited death. What kind of death was this? Forsaken by everybody and killed by the son he had never truly acknowledged.

He wanted to tell them to stop. That he would change. That he could change. But as he looked into the face of his son, he knew that though he had used that very same excuse all his life, it would not save him now. He had always escaped punishments from his father with that excuse, and had always considered him foolish for actually forgiving him. Meanwhile, he had punished Donpappa for trying to help others, something he had never done, and his son never tried to escape the punishments. Rather, he accepted them.

Perhaps this was a fitting end... killed by his son who had always been considered weak in comparison to him, when in fact, he had always been stronger...

Donpappa swung the sword, beheading his father instantly. Blood splashed upon his unflinching face.

Two cloaked companions, followed by the survivors of the now destroyed Lunpa fortress, slowly walked through the secret cave of the town and into the bordering forest.

No one but them knew of the terrible events that took place within the walls of fortress.

And no one but them knew of the terror that now awaited one specific settlement. It had long been thought a safe haven, isolated from the war, but the only reason this sanctuary had never been destroyed was because it had never needed to be. But now had come the time of its destruction.

They were headed for the town of Vale.

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***Chapter 2*: Chapter 2**

The Wrath of Dark Alchemy.

Reflections: The Calm before the Storm

A cold wind rustled the leaves of Tret, the revered guardian tree of the Kolima Forest, and his eyes opened slowly from his deep sleep. Sensing energy from his companion Laurel, his eyes looked to his right with a questioning glance before speaking in a guttural voice that held a degree of weariness. "Hrrooom... you have not found use for that power in a very long time. So you too have sensed the change..."

Laurel's eyes opened as the energy she had been emanating vanished. Her eyes looked to her left as she responded in a soothing, but tired voice. "The shadow has grown stronger without warning. Nature is withering... with the very presence of this power. Already I feel the sadness of the wood and the restlessness of the creatures, and its seal is far from broken."

"Have you been able to locate the heart of its power?"

"No. The shroud blinds me and leaves me in a pained state each time I attempt to discern its shape. Its strength can only mean that it is spreading along Angara much quicker than we anticipated."

"That is of no surprise..." Tret growled, suddenly angered. "Humankind and their trivial war have made it far too easy for the shroud to spread. Now they will all feel the pain they have brought upon themselves."

"They will not be the only ones to suffer. We too will be seized by its power soon..."

"Yes... that too has become apparent with the pain of our forest. This shroud and the power that cursed us in years past stem from the same source..." Tret shut his eyes for a few moments, feeling nothing but regret before speaking in a mournful tone. "Our forest... no, our world, is once again being pushed to the edge of destruction."

Bright moonlight cast a striking silvery glow over the surface of the majestic Karagol Sea. Small waves carried by a cold, but calming wind slowly drifted to the shores of the sea, creating a peaceful, natural ambience. Beneath the surface, all manner of aquatic life went about their lives, harmonious and diplomatic, guarded by the laws of nature, perhaps happy in the knowledge that all was well within the world.

An explosion sounded, the clashing of swords was heard, and bloodcurdling pained screams and angry roars of condemnation filled the air. Waves churned as ships collided and men and women were thrown from the decks into unforgiving and cruel waters. Their innate senses alerting them to the situation, the creatures of the sea fled, many of them seeing nothing but a strange blackness before simply drifting away lifeless. The moonlight that lit the way for those that battled went unnoticed.

On the shores of the Karagol, a small encampment of Tolbi soldiers listened to the distant raging battle. They spoke in hushed tones as their captains deliberated over their group's next move in a private tent. The speaking hushed a bit as a man with spiked blue hair emerged from the tent, clearly incensed by whatever had been said by the others.

The captain walked through the site without passing any glances to those around him. Gazes followed him as it became clear he was walking away from the camp and

towards the sea. The retreating soldier stopped at the sandy shore of the Karagol and began to walk along it, making sure to stay far enough from the incoming water.

"Sean!" A voice called out behind him and he turned around to look at his old friend, Ouranos.

"You're back already?" He immediately inquired with a sharp tone, fearing the worst.

"Why, yes, I'm perfectly fine," Ouranos muttered. "It's not like I was in a war, or anything."

"Cut the crap, Ouranos, I'd like to deliver some good news to the captains for a change."

"You'd better hope they're merciful, then."

Sean was silent for a moment, trying to ignore his growing headache, before inquiring with dread, "What happened out there?"

Ouranos' irritancy began to fade as he saw how distressed his friend looked; the captains must really have been giving him hell this time, and his news would no doubt be even more of a burden. "We beat Lunpa to Alhafra, and the mayor accepted our price. He said he was going to provide us with a new fleet of sail ships, gave us some fresh supplies and even allowed us to use the town as a port while we looked around Osenia." The red-haired man scoffed slightly with a shake of his head before continuing. "When we got back, Lunpa closed in around us."

"Lunpa?" Sean asked, his face a mask of disbelief. "They took over Alhafra?"

Ouranos had a look of disgust on his face. "The greedy bastard didn't even try to fight," He growled low in his throat. "He accepted Lunpa's terms and pay, gave them the ships meant for us, and kept all of our money afterwards. We literally gained nothing on this trip. And it gets better; the new naval force has formed a blockade around Champa. Briggs and his men have set up their defenses, but he knows full well that they can't win. My men and I have already decided that we're going back to help him out however we can. We can't afford to lose the Eastern Sea."

Sean nodded, barely listening as all he could think of was the hopelessness of their situation. Ouranos frowned as he saw the empty look on his friend's face. "Tell you what; I'll break the news for you before I go. You go on your walk. Looks like you need to get away from them for a while."

"They don't appreciate non-captains entering their meetings," Sean warned him, although Ouranos could hear a hint of amusement in his voice.

Ouranos shrugged boisterously with no sign of worry. "They know as well as I do that I could snap any one of them in two. Now go on. I'll deal with them." With that, he turned and walked towards the camp with a deliberate swagger in his step.

Sean could not help but smile as he watched his friend walk away. He made a mental note to apologize to him for his rudeness when he saw him later. After all, they both knew that neither of them would have survived long in this war without the other. Still, his brief feeling of camaraderie did nothing to change the sense of impending doom he felt, now that the situation had grown much direr for Tolbi. No allies, rapidly vanishing supplies, and a growing superpower led by Dodonpa. Unless something, anything, was done, Tolbi's

hopes of putting an end to the fighting were now non-existent.

With a heavy sigh, he continued his walk, staring out at the sea, listening to the conflicting sounds of the current battle and the incoming water. He took his gaze from the sea and looked forward, only to see that he apparently wasn't the only one in need of solitude.

Sitting on the shore just a few feet away from him was another soldier that he had seen a few times but had never spoken to. As the blue haired man approached the soldier, he noted, as he always did whenever he saw him, how young he appeared to be. He couldn't be much older than sixteen. The young boy had red hair and a golden-brown vest that for some reason seemed familiar to him.

The young boy turned his head, showing no signs of surprise. He passed a quick glance at the man before turning away. "I'll return to the camp in a few minutes. I just wanted to be away from the others for a while."

Sean walked up beside the young soldier who seemed far off in thought. "We have something in common, then. Do you mind if I stay?"

The boy shook his head and Sean sat down on the sand next to him, once again looking out at the water. After a few seconds of silence between them, Sean noticed the boy directly at something in the shore. Following his gaze, Sean noticed several fish floating lifelessly in the incoming water, their bodies coated in a black sludge.

The boy spoke at last, "What do you suppose is all over them?"

Sean spoke with a somber tone. "Oil that we got from Loho. We told the men to use it to burn enemy ships when they were in close combat."

"Oh..." was all the boy could say in reply as he looked over the dead creatures with an expression Sean could not read. His face just seemed empty, devoid of any overt emotion. A look like that was ill-fitting for a boy of such a young age, and Sean found himself overcome with pity. Though he wanted to say something of comfort, he could think of nothing and stayed silent, returning his gaze to the dark waters of the sea.

There was a grim silence until Sean attempted to change the subject by enquiring about the boy's familiar looking vest. "Excuse me for asking, but where did you acquire that vest?"

The boy looked down at his attire for a second before answering, a new smile now on his face. "It belonged to my brother. He gave it to me before he left home a long while back and never returned, so I've worn it for a long time to respect his memory. He was a hero, and an inspiration to me." He looked to the blue-haired man. "Why do you ask?"

A hero? Sean thought to himself, and as he looked at the teen's hair and eyes, he realized just why it had looked so familiar to him. "I saw a young traveler wearing it once. He had your hair and eyes..." He looked out over the Karagol again. "In fact, I met him briefly while traveling over this very sea, on a ship bound for Tolbi. I remember he helped to stop the attack of a huge Kraken that my friend and I couldn't defeat. I thought the ship was doomed when I was beaten, and he and a small group he was traveling with fought back. I was knocked out during most of the fight, but when I came to the monster was being thrashed. In the end,

your brother struck the finishing blow. It was awe-inspiring to say the least. Unfortunately, neither he nor his friends received the credit they deserved for their battle. Everyone assumed it was one of the strong seamen on the ship. But I knew..."

He turned back to the boy, and smiled as he saw a brighter look on his face upon hearing his story. "I'd say your brother certainly deserved the respect you give him as a hero. You'd best hold on to that vest closely."

The boy nodded with a smile on his face to replace the grim emptiness Sean had seen earlier.

"Well, I guess I'd better be heading back." With that, Sean pushed himself up from the shore, and the boy nodded. Before he turned to leave, he looked back and asked, "By the way, I never asked what your name is?"

"Aaron," He replied. "And you're Sean, right?"

Sean nodded. "It's been good talking to you, Aaron. I guess I'll see you soon. Best not stay out too late." With that, the blue-haired ex-captain turned and walked back towards the camp.

After a few seconds had passed, Aaron decided that it was time for him to go back to the camp as well. But as he walked back the same path he had earlier, he found that he no longer felt as solitary and out-of-place as he had then.

She looked up to the sky above Vale, which was beginning to darken rapidly. Ominous, black clouds covered the sky. No, not clouds... it was some mass of blackness that was forming above the town. Murmurs of fright and confusion

replaced the quiet talk that had been all she could hear seconds ago.

The still silence was broken by a horrified painful scream, and she whirled around, eyes widening as she saw a man fall to the ground dead, struck by what appeared to a fireball that was the purest black in color.

Chaos erupted as everyone began screaming in fear and agony as houses and markets were struck by dozens of black shapes that began to rain down from the clouds above. Before she began to run from the horrifying display, she realized that fireballs, shards of ice, giant swords of earthen energy, and lightning, all a ghastly shade of black, striking various areas of the town with deafening roars of thunder following each lightning strike. As she ran, her eyes were repeatedly blinded by the bright flashes of elemental light that followed each collision and lightning strike with the ground, signifying the objects she had seen to be a form of elemental power.

Soon, it seemed the unnatural storm was over, and the shroud of blackness was gone, replaced by normal looking storm clouds. The Valean villagers, fearing another attack, began to run to the north gate of the town for the safety of the caves. But as they neared the gate, brigands of Lunpa began to swarm into the town, forcing them back. The black-eyed demons cackled, preparing to hack and tear at all human flesh in sight with no remorse or discrimination.

The clouds desperately allowed water to relentlessly strike the ground with a deep rumbling sound. Enraged lightning seemed to flash with every life that was stolen. The destructive fire dissipated by the command of the elemental companions. Meanwhile, the earth could have rejoiced as

the rain washed away the blood that had been spilled upon it.

Then she stood in darkness, seeing a lone figure standing far away from her. She tried to run towards him, but she could not move, and he appeared to be moving closer to her without actually walking. Images flashed through her mind as he neared her... she saw her friends, saw them screaming in agony... she saw towns and cities burning in flames, flames that changed from a bright orange to the darkest black right before her eyes...

The room was fairly dim, the only light coming from a small oil lamp beside the bed. Sheba sat on the side of her bed, not planning on falling asleep anytime soon. The images of her nightmare of the previous night played over and over in her mind and she was unable to stop the shivering of her body. A few feet away from her on another cot, she heard the distressed movement and small whimpering of her sleeping friend, Jenna.

Getting up from her bed, Sheba began to walk over to her friend to rouse her from what was most certainly a terrible nightmare, but she was stopped when she heard someone call her name in a hushed whisper. Turning around, fearful for a second, she relaxed as she saw Felix standing in the doorway of the room. However, she felt a tinge of fear as she noticed how dangerous he looked in the dimness of the room. His hair was a mess, his clothes were tattered, his face stoic, and his eyes looked like black holes due to how far she was from him.

His eyes looked over the sleeping form of his sister, looking sad. He looked back at Sheba and tilted his head to the side, indicating that he wanted to speak to her outside.

Sheba nodded, and Felix turned to walk through the dark house and out of sight. Sheba felt torn between following him and waking Jenna, but as she started to reach for Jenna's shoulder, she pulled her arm back, feeling guilty. *She'll be fine... it's just a nightmare*, Sheba told herself. *She's too strong to let that get to her. You know that...*

Nodding as if agreeing with herself, she turned around and walked through the darkened house. The feeling of being lost and helpless in the dark brought back the memory of her nightmare and she shivered, as if expecting to see his face appear before her with those empty black eyes. But her eyes quickly adjusted to the total darkness and she found the door of the house. Opening it and walking outside, she quietly shut the door as Felix turned to face her, having been looking over the town he had long since left behind.

"How is she?" Felix spoke as she approached, his voice holding a degree of sadness.

"Sick, if you must know." Sheba said crossly, immediately feeling guilty of her tone, but she pressed on. "Of course, you'd know that if you were actually around when she needs you most. How long do you plan on playing the lone hero? Isn't this exactly what you promised Jenna you'd never do again years ago? I'm really worried about her, Felix!"

Felix nodded his head, his eyes downcast as he accepted every comment. "I know, Sheba. I don't deserve sympathy for this, but please understand me when I say this is for her safety. She's the most important person in the world to me, and that's why she can't know what I'm doing, even if it means breaking my promises. I couldn't trust her not to put herself in danger on my behalf."

"Danger, huh?" Sheba scoffed as she shook her head in exasperated disbelief. "You're not doing a good job of convincing me that we shouldn't know about this."

"I just can't tell you, Sheba. Not now, at least. It's for your own good to remain ignorant of what I'm doing."

"I still don't understand, after all this time. Are you going to attack Dodonpa or something?" Sheba asked.

"What I'm doing is far more dangerous than that." Felix said, staring into the night to avoid making eye contact with her. "That should be all you need to know to understand how important it is that she does not get involved, under any circumstances."

Sheba shook her head bitterly again, looking at the ground. "Fine," She said, still angry. "But you will explain everything to us eventually. I'm getting tired of playing the uninformed idiot in these nightly meetings."

"It's not my intent to make you feel that way, Sheba."

Lavender eyes met brown ones. "...I know. I'm sorry, Felix. I just don't like knowing I can't help you."

"You are helping me, Sheba. Knowing that you're here with Jenna is more than I could ever ask of you."

"Maybe, but I can only stand in for you for so long. You're the one she needs right now, Felix."

"I know..."

An uncomfortable silence, then Felix spoke again, worry present in his voice. "You said she was sick. Is it serious?"

"Just a fever. It's fading, but she still needs some rest. It's kind of hard for me to believe sometimes. When I think of Jenna, I don't think of someone who needs bed rest." Sheba felt a bit awkward trying to make casual conversation, but Felix smiled at her comments. Sheba couldn't help but think to herself that it was the first smile she had seen in days.

"What about Vale?" Felix asked grimly, his smile quickly fading. "Is it as bad as before?"

"The situation's improved thanks to Piers. He still has his boat on a river close by, and he's been gathering from and trading supplies with other surviving towns. I guess things are about as good as they'll get for a while now."

"These things take time. They will get better soon."

"Soon...? Why do you say that?"

"...It's just what I believe. That's all."

Something about his tone sounded unnatural to Sheba, like he was trying to cover something up, but she let it pass. She knew any questions she had would not be answered. As silence reigned again, she remembered the horrific dream, and her face fell into a frown.

Felix looked concerned once more. "What is it?"

"I had a nightmare last night. I haven't been able to sleep since, and I've been thinking about it all day."

"What was it?"

"I don't even know how to begin explaining it. I saw Vale at first, and everything looks normal, but then I saw it being destroyed... by some bizarre form of Psynergy, from what I

gather. And then, Lunpa thieves started charging into Vale and started killing everybody..."

As Sheba was looking at the ground as she relayed the frightful images she had seen, she didn't notice the immediate look of fear on Felix's face as she spoke of the strange Psynergy. "What does this Psynergy look like? Can you remember?"

"It was a storm of spells, as if a hundred Adepts were attacking. From what I could see, the spells worked just like the Ragnarok, Fireball, Plasma, and Prism spells. But, they were... black... like shadows of themselves or something. I really can't explain it..."

She looked up to see Felix looking confused, but she could see a hint of fear in his face. "What's wrong?"

Rather than answering, Felix turned away from her, a cold, distant look on his face. Sheba raised an eyebrow at his behavior. "Felix, what is it?"

"Sheba, listen..." He said, looking like he was speaking to the night. "If I were to... if I don't make it, Jenna's going to need you. I'm depending on you to be there for her. Goodbye..." With that, he suddenly took off at a sprint, running into the night.

Stunned, Sheba wanted to give chase, but he was moving too fast for her to catch up with him. His last words stayed with her, and she shivered. What was wrong with him? If what he was doing was life-threatening, why did he not want his friends to help him? And why had he left so quickly at the mention of her dream?

Sheba sighed and was about to go into the house, but decided against it. She was not planning on sleeping, and it

was probably best to leave Jenna to rest for right now. Thoughts of the violent imagery of her nightmare returned to her, as she began to walk through the village of Vale, needing time to think. She was not even sure why the dream would not leave her mind. She supposed it was because even though she had had nightmares in the past, none she could remember had ever been as vivid and clear as the one she saw. She looked around at all the houses she had seen be torn apart in her dream, and shook her head sorrowfully as she recalled all of the pain the people of Vale had survived to create them.

Ever since the town had been mostly reconstructed nearby the site of the old Vale, nothing but pain had followed. The reconstruction sadly was never to be truly completed, as the war of Lunpa and Kalay had immediately begun to break out across Angara, and any help that could have been had from neighboring towns would never come.

Meanwhile, the Wise One had requested an audience with Isaac and had revealed to him that he had been given a portion of Alchemy's power by the Wise One himself. Thus, he would soon have to leave Vale to live a solitary life for a short time, as the massive power he now held would be too dangerous in its infancy stages. Unable to choose differently, Isaac had accepted the Wise One's task, but fate apparently had decided his departure could not be a peaceful one. Just as he had prepared to leave, the army of Lunpa mounted a vicious assault on Vale in a gambit to raid the town of the last provisions it had to offer.

The Adepts had had to stand as the only defense of the beleaguered town. It would be the last time all of them stood together as a team.

All of the Valean Adepts had lost every member of their families on that horrible day, except for Gareth who still had his brother. Isaac had disappeared directly after the invasion, and she knew why. She had felt his power erupt somewhere in the village from his rage at the attackers, no doubt from the deaths of his parents. And indeed, in the aftermath, many Lunpan invaders were found dead. At the loss of many of their men, the Lunpa army had retreated, but neither they nor the remaining villagers truly realized what had happened. She could not find him afterward, and soon it was declared that he had departed the town after the army's attack had ended. Sheba could not imagine what it must have felt like to take so many human lives.

After helping the town recover from the assault, Ivan and Mia had both left as well to look after their respective hometowns, and Gareth had left to fight in the war against Lunpa. None of them had ever returned.

The remaining members of the team had become divided amongst themselves after the attack. Felix had become cold and distant to the others after his parents had been killed, and had eventually left Vale as well. It was only during this last year that he had finally returned, only keeping in contact with Sheba to check in on Vale and his sister before departing quickly. Jenna had become confined to her house in a deep depression, her strong, outgoing personality now only a memory to Sheba. Piers, like Sheba, had been changed the least by what had happened due to having no specific connection to Vale, but had nonetheless been affected by the pain of his friends, understanding the loss of beloved family members. Sheba barely saw him these days, as when he was not away gathering provisions for the town, he stayed secluded in his ship, solitary as he had always been.

For the next two years, the remaining people of Vale had slowly begun to adopt a cold attitude due to their strife. They had become unfriendly towards each other, and scorned the Adepts that had tried so hard to protect them, sometimes even blaming them for their suffering. Isaac in particular was the target of many foul words and insulting claims after he had left them all. Things only got worse when more attacks came and drove the Valeans further away from the site of their old home, forcing them to once again grieve the destruction of the place they called home. For the past three years, the third and final Vale settlement had stood strong and was well-protected, but that did nothing to heal the wounds.

Sheba could not understand why the people of such a once peaceful town would become so bitter and angry. She knew they were only human, but surely such terrible times called for unity rather than discord? Admittedly, she often felt bitter that Isaac had left so abruptly, without even staying to help with the reconstruction, but she always pushed those feelings away. After all, he had been responsible for the deaths of many human beings. She could not imagine how mortified he must have felt. But the villagers were not nearly so forgiving.

She supposed it was easy to say that the war had changed everybody. But that line of thought only brought more pain, because to her, that only meant that the instinct to be distrusting and hateful was inside of these people all the time. The war had simply brought their true colors to light, and the masks of goodness she had become accustomed to seeing had been lifted. Never had they thought of uniting to be at peace. It was as if they preferred to be divided instead, so that they could fight and kill for their own survival, all others be damned. Such ignorance and selfishness angered Sheba to no end.

She knew that she could not expect the world to right itself, but she also knew that even if she and the rest of the Adepts were to go out and use every last bit of their strength to fight against the growing powers of Lunpa, Kalay, and every other town that had allied with them, not only would they eventually be killed once their energies were used up, but their powers would not end the hatred of their warring world. The fighting would only continue unless they were to take control of Weyard, and there was nothing to be gained from that. And no matter how many times she told herself that it was selfish to feel this way, that she should have hope, the crushing helplessness that accompanied these cynical thoughts never faded.

The Wise One's words on the fateful day of the journey's end floated back to her, *"It is inevitable. In time, one man will seek to rule over all. It is human nature, inescapable."*

Sheba stopped walking as she dwelled on those words, and slowly looked up at the sky, not staring at anything. Again, the grim feelings of hopelessness began to fill her, and she clenched her fists tightly, wishing she could just scream. Finally, she spoke, her voice thick with contempt.

"You were right," she spoke into the night. "You were right. We didn't accomplish anything. You win. Take your victory and keep hiding, you worthless bastard..."

She felt her eyes dampen as she spoke such cutting words, and tried to rub them dry which only caused more tears to fall. Eventually, she could hold back her true feelings no longer, and she collapsed to her knees with her hands over her face, sobbing loudly for a world she had failed.

The figure cloaked in dark blue surveyed the large group that was spread out in the clearing behind him. The former thieves of Lunpa and soldiers of Kalay were all sitting, waiting expectantly for an order, while the beast of Lunpa behind them, slept soundly. It seemed, the azure figure noted with amusement, that his partner who had cursed these souls had decided to release Lunpa's monster from his curse's control, showing that he had a greater respect for the monster than he did for any of the humans under his control. They certainly were alike in that sense.

Looking around the rest of the clearing, he took note of the other members of the covenant, silently awaiting the call for their nightly meeting to begin. A man wearing a mask painted in shades of green and brown was sitting as he leaned against a tree, his right arm propped up on his right knee, apparently miles away in deep contemplation. Two women, both wearing mauve cloaks woven in silk, spoke silently in hushed voices so that no one could hear their words. There was another man in a cloak of a bloody crimson hue, quietly speaking words of reassurance to the silent soldiers for the coming task ahead.

Finally, there was a man that was cloaked in robes of a slightly lighter hue of blue than those worn by the observer. No one seemed to acknowledge his presence, which he didn't mind. He enjoyed working alone and in obscurity, never letting anyone know what side he was truly on. Seeing the crimson man's actions, the light-blue figure approached him, catching the attention of the silent masked man, who watched with a sigh that signified his understanding of what was about to occur.

"I am surprised at your compassion, Garet, considering your motivation for even being here..." The cerulean man spoke.

"I doubt they can even comprehend what you are telling them, so why waste your time?"

Garet regarded the other man with an angered look. He spoke, his tone harsh, yet composed, like a tranquil fire that had not yet begun to rage. "Cursed or not, they are human beings, Alex. I realize how unfamiliar the concept of camaraderie is to you, but my memory of it has not yet been fully driven away. They are now bound to our cause, and they at least deserve to be treated as our allies, not slaves. Besides, I'm speaking only to the soldiers, not the thieves. I've no use or sympathy for them."

"Such flawed reasoning," Alex admonished, shaking his head in a mocking fashion, enjoying the debate he had sparked. "Are you saying the amount of destruction and killing that was caused by some of these very soldiers is not deserving of punishment, despite being just as guilty of brutally murdering innocents in blind rage just as Lunpa's brigands have? For that matter, how exactly do you justify painting all of the thieves with the same brush? Are you saying they are all villains? What a black and white world you must live in..."

"Stop talking to me like I know nothing about war when I'm the only one of us that has actually fought," The Mars Adept growled in his throat before once again speaking in a composed manner. "I never claimed to understand the motivations of every soldier. I understand the pain of being lost in rage, but I have no sympathy for those who choose to live lives of crime."

The blue-haired man sneered coldly. "Your logic seems to stem from the idea that people are deserving of compassion, but only so long as they share the beliefs and morals that you deem to be right. So enlighten me of your justification

of this reasoning, please, as your usual cynical mutterings that an ignorant, maladjusted child could conjure are hardly what I would call proof of your so-called experience. Or do you believe that because you entered the fray, you have all the knowledge, and the rest of us should be honoring you?"

"You've always been content to wallow in your own supposed superiority, so why should I waste my time arguing with you?" The fiery man spat before turning away. "Again, just remember, of the two of us, I'm the only one who's fought for others, and I've expected no thanks for it. What exactly have you done for the world besides watch it collapse?" With that said, he walked away to one end of the clearing, angrily looking away into the night.

Alex quietly scoffed, though it was clear to everyone watching that he had no reply, before turning away and walking towards the tree he had rested against earlier. The masked man watched as he did and sighed again with a shake of his head. Meanwhile, the two women, who had been silent as they listened to the argument, resumed their quiet conversing.

"Such meaningless disputes," said the soft voice of the younger of the two women, shaking her head in disgust. "Do they not see that nothing is accomplished from warring with one another? Especially they, who both want nothing more than to destroy the Alchemist..."

The other woman's eyes, which had been known to perpetually hold a degree of grim sadness, softened slightly as she turned her gaze to her partner and spoke in a calm, yet tired voice that spoke of wisdom. Hers was the voice of a clairvoyant.

"Old wounds seldom fade, and theirs is a hatred that began years ago. By a cruel chance of fate, their goal to destroy the Alchemist is the only trait they share, and it keeps them from destroying each other. Otherwise, they are naturally opposites in every way, from their ideals to their very elements." Her voice then lowered to a whisper. "But beyond that, it has been clear from this group's inception that it is not trust that has held us together, but our need to further our own individual goals. Naturally, this fuels the fires of their mutual disgust, for they too know that only one of us can hold that power in the end."

"Should we know what outcome we would rather face; be it destruction or salvation? If so, then I am worried that I do not."

"I imagine most people who live through times such as these would feel the same way. I myself have felt both contentment and guilt at the thought of us all destroying each other, and returning the world to its natural balance. But for all of our failings, I always find myself arriving to the conclusion that we do not deserve destruction. We have not yet declined so far..."

The younger woman did not reply for a few moments, seemingly content to stare at the ground before looking back up at her companion. "Well, it does not matter. It is of little importance to me."

The seer looked at her with a tiny hint of surprise in her gaze. "Our fates mean nothing to you?"

"Fate itself means nothing to me any longer. If I still believed myself to be a slave to the power of fate, then I would not be here with you, nor would I have come to discover the

happiness I now feel." She accentuated this fact by covertly grasping the other woman's hand, eliciting a private smile.

The observer stayed silent as he watched, amused at the image before him. None of the members of this dark order trusted each other enough to even be close to one another. This would work to his advantage. However, he knew, with a slight sense of apprehension, if he was to make a single mistake, and they learned of his plan for them, they certainly would unify against him. He would have to proceed carefully...

As he pushed away his thoughts, he suddenly smiled as he sensed the presence of his partner, the man who had aided him in the infiltration of Lunpa. "What kept you?" He inquired silently.

"Personal business," The other man replied in the same world-weary voice he always had. "But now, we are ready to commence."

At his words, the other members of this dark cult began to converge in a circle, as the soldiers and thieves watched with no sign of emotion on their blank faces.

The man cloaked in black began the meeting by speaking first. "As you know by now, the dark star of Jupiter has been stolen from us by the werewolf Maha. You have been summoned earlier than expected because we will have to make changes to our original plan."

The man cloaked in blue was silent for a few seconds, awaiting any further words from the other leader, but he said nothing more. As he prepared to speak, the wind picked up, slightly breaking the silence as if creating a chilling atmosphere for the man's words. He cast a look in the direction of the clairvoyant woman as he spoke. "You have

informed us that you have foreseen the early return of the Alchemist, correct?"

She nodded to him in confirmation, as Gareth silently clenched his fists in rage, his sudden show of anger going unnoticed by all. The masked man said nothing, seemingly miles away due to his hidden face.

Alex suddenly spoke up, not even attempting to hide a tone of suspicion in his voice. "Then, if you do not mind my asking, how is it that you did not foresee the stealing of the star?"

The younger of the two women glared at him and drew her breath indignantly as her partner placed a hand on her shoulder to keep her from lashing out. "As I have explained to you before," The older woman said with a cold voice, narrowing her eyes at him. "The ability to anticipate future events does not make one omniscient. The future is full of simultaneous events and is just as much in motion as the present. I was focused on the return of the Alchemist and thus did not foresee the stealing of the star. If I had anything to hide, I would not have revealed the Alchemist's return. Wouldn't you agree?"

The Water Adept gave a shrug of his shoulders. "I suppose, but it is more than a little coincidental... what with the disappearance of the star that is aligned with your elements. It would be too easy for you to allow Maha to take the star, especially since he was last sighted in your brother's hometown."

"Enough," The dark-blue leader said, rendering Alex silent. "This is not about blame. The point is that his resurfacing and the disappearance of the star are obviously connected, and so we believe that the alchemist already knows of us.

Obviously, this will complicate our plans, but the result will remain the same. We will draw him here with an attack on Vale, and he will soon after be a strong, new ally to our cause."

"What are you talking about?" Gareth growled. "Allying with Isaac wasn't what you promised me! If you think I'm letting him slip by this time, you're greatly mistaken." The masked man looked toward him with a vicious glare.

"Wrong as usual, I am afraid," Alex interrupted in an almost lazy tone. "Your petty vendetta will not interfere with our destined conflict. If I am feeling generous when the time comes, I shall leave him for you to dispose of when I am finished with him, but only then."

"You, of all people, are accusing me of holding a petty vendetta, when you can barely hide your jealousy of his grip on Alchemy?"

"Do not speak as if either of you have the power to defy my orders," The dark-azure man spoke darkly, his very being giving off a cold and frightful air. "Do not forget who is in control... who has been in control all these years. Both of you will get the chance to fight him when and if I say so, but until then, you will keep silent."

Gareth seemed to give off a contrasting air of angry heat, as if to challenge the other man.

"That is enough," The man in black finally interrupted. "You three will not derail the focus of this meeting any longer. The alchemist will be brought to our side through the curse. What happens to him once he has served his purpose is another issue. Settle that pointless dispute elsewhere." With that, the argument was over, but Gareth sent the man in

black a glare more heated than the looks he had sent to the two men he had just argued with.

After a tense silence, Alex spoke up. "But our chances of taking him under the curse are slim, almost nonexistent. To corrupt the power of Alchemy will be no easy task, unless he is put into a position where his focus is lost. I assume that is the plan?"

"Indeed," the dark blue man said with a confident tone before turning to the masked man. "That will be your job. You will bring those closest to him before me during our attack on Vale. You will catch them off balance while they defend the town. Until then, you will remain here with our soldiers."

The expressionless mask did nothing to hide its wearer's anger. "That makes both of the deals I made with you completely worthless. You promised me no harm would ever befall them or the town."

"I also told you that if the time came, personal sacrifices on your part would have to be made. Well, that time has come, and this is a sacrifice you will have to make. You agreed to those terms, so there will be no backing out of our arrangement now."

"But why do we need to draw his attention by attacking the town at all if he's already on his way?"

"I have foreseen that he would return to Angara, but not that he would meet us in battle," The clairvoyant woman answered. "I believe then, that the purpose of the attack is to ensure that he walks into our trap. Although I cannot say I condone the idea myself."

"The town will survive," The leader spoke with an uncaring tone. "The assault will catch the Alchemist's remaining allies off-guard so that they may be used to bait him into our trap once you bring them to us. Once he is under our control and the dark star of Venus is in our possession, your friends will be freed."

The masked man nodded his head, the dark-brown eyes behind the mask never losing their anger as he stared at the leader of the group. "Alright... it's done, then."

With that, the dark azure-cloaked man nodded back and turned to face the group. "Before we make our attack, we will have to make sure the rest of the stars cannot be found for now." He focused his gaze on Alex as he revealed a Mythrill bag he had been concealing in his cloak, beckoning him to take it. "I am entrusting the Mercury Star to you. You are to take it to Conservato. It will be safe under the Senate's watchful gaze."

Alex raised an eyebrow at this as he took the bag. "May I ask why we do not simply convert the Mercury Lighthouse right now?"

"As I have said before, my reasons for waiting will be revealed soon. Until then, you will do as I say."

Alex sighed and nodded. "If I must, then you may consider it done."

The cloaked man then turned to Gareth.

"As for you, you will go to the Lunpa encampment by the Karagol Sea. Gather the Veiled Sentry and begin a search for Maha in the forests bordering Kalay. If he is found, I want you only to apprehend him, not kill him. Then bring him to me."

Garet raised an eyebrow. "How do you know he is still in Angara?"

"As was touched upon earlier, I have been receiving reports from my spies in Kalay that he has been sighted numerous times in the forests, and has even entered the Kalay fortress. He has yet to find a way off the continent, and he must not be allowed to escape. If he is as intelligent as we think, he will have hidden the star by now. If he is killed, then we will be blind to its whereabouts..."

He then turned to the two women. "This brings us to your task. Both of you will go to Kalay and search the fortress for the star. If it is not found, bring the Jupiter Adept who resides there before me as well. If Maha has truly been to Kalay, then that Adept is the only one who could possibly have any connection to the dark star of Jupiter. We cannot risk the Alchemist acquiring new allies."

"Understood," The seer responded, ignoring the worried look of her partner as she sent a particularly scathing look in Alex's direction.

"Do you all fully understand what you are to do?"

All present nodded their heads, and the leader smiled. "We have never been as close as we are now to attaining our victory. Soon, Weyard will be healed of all its pain. Tomorrow, we will reconvene here in the morning... except you." He narrowed his eyes at Garet, whose look of surprise immediately changed to one of indignant anger.

"What? Why?"

"You have an important mission already. If you find Maha tonight, however, you may join us. In fact, I may even let you be the one to intercept the Alchemist."

Garet could see no alternative. "Fine, I'll deliver the werewolf to you as soon as possible."

"Then this meeting is finished. Be on your way." With that, the dark-azure figure shut his eyes, and with a burst of Psynergy, he warped away from the clearing.

The man in black then turned around and walked out of the clearing without a word until he was out of sight. The two women left immediately as well, headed towards their destination at a sprint. As he prepared to leave, Garet gave the masked man a malicious scowl and spoke, "Did you have something to say before, Felix?" When no answer was given, he smirked. "That's what I thought. Keep hiding behind that stupid thing." The Mars Adept took off at a sprint towards his own destination, disappearing into the night.

Then, Felix and Alex were left alone with the silent army, and Alex turned to his last remaining companion and shook his head irreverently. "Why *do* you hide behind such an ugly thing, Felix? I know you are not trying to fool anyone."

The brown-haired man turned his head slightly to look at the blue-haired man while he spoke. "I'm ashamed of showing my face when I'm present at these meetings. I will not look upon familiar faces of people who once called me a hero while I associate with this group, even if they are a part of it as well."

"I see. I take it your other mask will soon be removed as well?"

Felix narrowed his eyes at the blue-haired man. "I suppose I have no choice now."

"If I were you, I would warn your friends to just escape from what will inevitably occur. But they would never so readily

abandon the Valeans, would they?"

"I haven't abandoned them, either, Alex," Felix snapped.
"Not like Garet... or Isaac for that matter..."

"I did not say anything, Felix, you did." Alex responded with a composed smile. "It seems you still, after all this time, have not found it in you to do away with the prison of your personal attachments as I have. It never ceases to amaze me that you went ahead and signed his blood contract so readily given this severe problem. I always thought you were smarter than that..."

"I was still reeling from the loss of my family, and it is because of that that his promises swayed me. I was young; I wanted these Lunpans to pay for the pain they had caused me. That old mindset of mine is the only thing I regret, but I won't apologize for trying to keep my friends safe while trying to impede his plans as best I could."

"Courageous of you, no doubt... I suppose all I can do is wish you luck in your endeavor."

Felix narrowed his eyes again, this time in confusion. "Alex, why are you encouraging me when we have opposing goals?"

"Do not worry. I am not planning to betray you. I simply see your personal task, as well as everyone else's, to be beneficial to my own plans to keep him away from Dark Alchemy's full potential."

"If that's true, then why did you draw attention to Hama just now and attempt to label her as the traitor?"

"I was helping his little witch hunt along," Alex replied. "For now, I am going to need his trust on my side."

"What are you talking about?"

"Surely you could see that he was trying to weed out the wolf in sheep's clothing by giving us all tasks that specifically work against our interests. It seems Maha's betrayal has helped him to realize that his plan will fail if he does not watch his partners more carefully."

"If you have a point to make, Alex, start making it."

"Oh, use your brain, Felix. First of all, he told Hama to bring her brother before him to test her loyalty to the cause. Whether he planned to do this before I put attention on to her is anyone's guess and one I doubt, considering he did not even know that that Jupiter Adept was her brother until I mentioned it. He left the Mercury Star in my possession to see if I would attempt to convert the lighthouse against his orders, and he is no doubt at the lighthouse right now waiting for me to try. He is shrewd, to say the least, but he has not fooled me. And why do you think he gave Gareth instructions not to aid in the attack? Because not only does the attack on Vale work against both of your interests, but Gareth being kept away from his best chance at attacking Isaac himself is double the motivation to betray his orders."

"Garet didn't even say a word about Vale's safety," Felix retorted. "His only concern is when he gets to go after Isaac."

"Well, far be it from me to defend the honor of that idiot, but I am quite sure he is just as conflicted about Vale's fate as you are. However, unlike you, he does not have the excuse of spying on the enemy to keep Weyard safe. Do you think the others would just welcome him back with open arms if they knew what he intended to do with Isaac?"

Felix did not speak for a moment, the anger in his eyes fading. "I suppose... his situation is a lot like the one I found myself in years ago."

Alex shook his head, frowning. "I would not go that far. No matter how you may feel about it, you had a noble cause to fulfill, Felix. Garet does not. Nor do I, for that matter, but I do not pretend to like he does."

"You mean using the attack on Vale to further your own goals?"

"In a word, yes. Glare all you want, Felix, but I do not care what happens to Vale or the rest of the team for that matter. The way I see it, if the rest of them betray him as you will, then I will be free of all suspicion until the time is right, and if they don't, then his attention will be placed on you as the sole traitor. Either way, my plans get a push forward."

"So you intend to follow his orders?"

"For now, I have no choice until I find out what his intentions with all the stars are, and why he is holding us back. There is too much at stake to try to betray him right now."

Felix shook his head slightly in disbelief. "You really haven't changed at all, Alex. You are still using everyone to your advantage, and we both know how well that worked out the first time."

"And as we both also know, if it were not for the Wise One, I would have succeeded."

"That doesn't make what you did any less dangerous. You don't know what he and his partner are truly capable of. If you managed to plan this entire thing out, how do you know

that they haven't as well? They could be manipulating you as you once did to us."

Alex looked around for a second, as if expecting to see the aforementioned partner listening in on them, and responded in a voice that Felix noticed was slightly lower in volume.

"You may be right about that much. His partner is the only one who I still do not understand fully. He does not seem to share the same drive for Dark Alchemy's unleashing, but he is far too elusive for me to be sure. If he were to take action against me, I admit I probably would not expect it. However, I am too far into this now, so there is really nothing I can do except watch and wait for everything to play itself out."

There was a moment of silence before Alex prepared to warp himself away. "Well, as I said, I wish you luck, Felix. It is all I can and will give you."

"Alex, wait," Felix said, stopping Alex from leaving. "If your plans do work, will you really try to take Dark Alchemy for yourself?"

"I have not crawled away from death to let my chances slip away now."

"Then you understand that I will have to fight you when the time comes."

"I look forward to it. Farewell, Felix." With that, the Water Adept finally disappeared in a burst of light and Felix was left alone to his thoughts.

Edited: 4/30/2016

Disclaimer: I own nothing related to Golden Sun.

No, I most certainly did not put this story off for three years. Stop talking nonsense. But seriously, hopefully those who have read this story before (all three of you who remain) the first fifty times I uploaded it (pretentious idiot that I was) have been thrown for a loop with all the twists I'm making and the characters I'm adding. I hope it keeps your interest, despite my obvious problem with writing credible dialogue. I can guarantee that this one will stay up.

And finally, while it doesn't mean much now, a huge thanks to the first reviewer of this story, as well as anyone taking the time to read this. This is ClairvoyantMoonchild, really wishing he had thought of the title *Dark Dawn* first for this story, signing off.

***Chapter 3*: Chapter 3**

The Wrath of Dark Alchemy

Purification: The Breaking of the Dark Covenant

One is "good". One is "evil".

One is a "hero". One is a "villain".

One basks in the "light". One lurks in the "dark".

Yet the only true difference lies in the words used to define them.

The man in black stood alone and silent atop a large hill, allowing him to overlook the immediate lands of Angara surrounding him. He stood with a sense of purpose and importance, reflecting on the mission that had been forced upon him. Yet he could not help but notice that there was nothing in his surroundings to suggest that he held any inherent importance. He held within his hands the ability to alter all that he saw, to control the very building blocks of the world around him. Yet the flowing rivers, the blowing winds, the strong earth, and the burning magma far beneath his feet took no notice of him. And nor did the skies, the oceans, or the mountains.

Meaningless, he thought to himself. *Insignificant.*
Purposeless. Empty.

He was fascinated with the words of humans that he had begun to recollect over the years. There were so many to describe his true standing in this world. But many people could be called such cutting things, and he was obviously

not like them. Of all the words he liked to use to describe himself, his favorite was shadow. It was not a word one generally used to describe oneself, but it was too appropriate for him not to use. An image without a true distinguishing appearance to call its own. Yes, he quite liked that word.

He turned slowly to the sound of footsteps to see the young Lunpa boy that had fallen victim to his curse during the siege of the town's fortress. Having telepathically summoned him, the enshrouded figure did not regard the young visitor with any sign of surprise. The boy's eyes were still as black as night, and there was no expression on his face. He stood as still as a statue before the man cloaked in shadow, awaiting any form of command.

But the man did not issue an order. Instead, rings of blackness with a purple aura surrounded him as his body radiated with elemental energy. Then the energy died down and the man looked at the boy for a few moments, his usually emotionless eyes showing a sign of remorse for a split-second. He shut his eyes and his body began to emit waves of his mental energy once more; this time the black rings that emanated from his form did not possess any glow around them, making them nearly impossible to see in the night. Both were silent until the boy let out a gasp at the same time as the disappearance of the rings of energy. He stepped away from the man in surprise, and looked around fearfully, confused as to where he was. His eyes were no longer devoid of the blackness that had been present only seconds earlier.

After looking around in confusion, the boy looked back at the man in black and continued to step back, fearing that the man would once again use his frightening power and take control of him once more. A few seconds passed, and

the look of fear on Donpappa's face changed to one of recognition. "It's you..." He spoke in a voice slightly above a whisper.

Without a reply, man in black turned away from him and continued to seemingly stare into space. "Go now," He said in his monotonous voice after a few seconds. "You are no longer apart of this. Go wherever you see fit."

Silence. "Wait..." Donpappa took a hesitant step towards the dark man. "Why're you letting me go?"

The man did not reply for a moment. Seconds of uncomfortable silence passed between them before he finally spoke, "I do not know."

The young soldier was not satisfied with the answer, but decided not to push the point any further. There was still something unsettling about this man, but there was also much he wanted and needed to know.

"Did I really... did I... kill him? My father?"

"The Lunpa lord is dead, yes. Slain by your own hand."

"But, you made me do it... didn't you?" Even to Donpappa, it sounded like a weak denial, but was he really wrong?

"My power made you incapable of turning away from the task, but your hatred of him is what gave you strength. Such is the design of the curse you were placed under."

"Dark Curse..." Donpappa whispered to himself, recalling what had been said before he had lost control of his own mind. "What is it?" He knew the question was foolishly vague; he did not even know what the nature of the

aforementioned curse was. But the man seemed to have been prepared to answer such a question.

"A power that makes you a slave not only to the one that ensnares your mind, but a slave to your most basic, violent desires that all human beings attempt to rise above. The more aggressive a man... the more powerful the effect."

None of the man's explanation was making sense to Donpappa, but he knew he obviously could not contradict him after what had just happened. "You can tell me all of this, but not why you are letting me go?"

"That is correct. Unless you would rather remain a cursed being, you would do well to leave now." The words signified a threat, but the man did not even sound like he had the ability to muster a menacing tone.

An uncomfortable silence settled over them again for a moment. "Where do I go now?"

"Wherever you please. It is of little consequence whether you remain with us or leave us."

"What do you mean?"

"You will see. Or perhaps you will not. I can not tell you myself."

With that, the man turned and sprinted away from Donpappa. The young soldier watched the dark figure depart into the shadows of forest trees. For a moment, Donpappa thought he saw the figure pull something from within his cloak, but in the blink of an eye, he suddenly disappeared. Donpappa blinked a few more times, as if expecting the man to reappear, but he was gone. The boy

expelled a breath and turned around, unknowing of what to do now.

There had been one more question he had wanted to ask, the question of the man's identity. Donpappa had seen his face before, he knew that to be so. But somehow, from the moment he had looked into the familiar man's ebony eyes and heard him speak in that empty voice, he had realized that whomever he had been speaking to was *not* the same person he had met, if only briefly, all those years ago.

The Veiled Sentry were a secretive group of human-shaped creatures whose only calling was cold-blooded assassination. Handpicked among many of the same creatures by the Dark Alchemist himself for their knowledge of tracking and infiltration, they had become a powerful force feared by those that opposed Lunpa. Numerous times had they single-handedly turned the tide of a battle by leaving many in an encampment dead by the end of the night, only rarely being seen by anybody. Now they were going to be called once again.

Garet slowly approached the encampment of Lunpa, which rested before the shores of the Karagol Sea. The old Kalay dock shop where tickets for boat trips had once been sold now served as a resting station for the wounded soldiers. Hastily constructed tents surrounded the small station, where the soldiers of Lunpa were sleeping for the night. Along the docks were a few remaining soldiers with their weapons in hand, keeping watch and listening to the battle over the great sea before them.

As the Mars Adept stopped and looked about at the men he had once been fighting against, and saw the same fear and apprehension that he had seen in the faces of those he had

once called his allies, he remembered his harsh words to Alex in which he had condemned these very men for their atrocities. The very men that he was now expected to call his new allies. Gareth cringed slightly at the sense of guilt enveloping him, but the feeling faded away as he gripped his gloved hands tightly, remembering the cause of his anger.

A 'maladjusted child', am I? Gareth thought with an ugly scowl. *Maybe, but he's no better. Self-serving bastard never had to watch his family die. Never lifted a finger to help anyone but himself.* And even then, Gareth reasoned to himself, these men were still thieves; they were brigands who would have sooner looted a distraught town than admit that their leader's ambitions were wrong. Maybe they were honorable in a sense, but they had marked themselves as criminals. It was no one's fault but their own for being judged as the deadly men the frightened people of Weyard now perceived them to be.

With that, the former soldier pushed aside his thoughts and walked toward the camp, catching the attention of several Lunpa thieves and soldiers. There was no discernable emotion in their eyes as they watched him, but even if there had been, Gareth would not have noticed. He walked toward one of the soldiers resting on the dock, who immediately straightened up, and spoke in a hushed voice. "I am here for the Veiled Sentry. Where are they?"

A look of fear passed over the soldier's face, but he nodded and motioned for Gareth to follow him. The uneasy man began to lead him through the camp, eventually coming to a stop before a tent of black cloth situated several feet away from the rest. There was nothing to suggest it was any different from the rest, but the look on the man's face told the story.

"By your leave," the soldier said as he made to return to his post, no doubt relieved to put as much distance between him and the black tent as possible. Gareth barely acknowledged the soldier as he pulled the flap open and entered. It was dark, but the six pairs of glowing red and green eyes told him that he was being watched.

"We have a mission for you. Get out here. Now." His command clear, Gareth took a step back to give the servants of his leader space to exit the tent. With an almost ghostly silence, six of them emerged from the dark and stepped into the torch light, lining up in two lines of three.

They were human-shape creatures, so named for their shadowed faces hidden behind their large veils. Their heads were encased in turbans with a single large feather on each of them. The only indication of there being something beyond the cloth were their glowing eyes. In the dim light, Gareth could make out the different colors of their attire. In one line, three of the assassins were wearing blue veils and green turbans, the Assassin class, while the second line of assassins hid behind pink veils and purple turbans, the deadlier Slayer class. Their bodies were encased in black cloth and the armor of soldiers they had no doubt killed themselves. Each of the creatures also had small, sharp daggers clenched in each hand. The Slayers, however, also carried traveler packs slung over their shoulders filled with smoke bombs, sleep bombs, and other dangerous items that allowed them to strike from a distance.

With six members of the sentry lined up and ready, Gareth looked to the tent, awaiting the seventh and final member.

A guttural growl came from within the tent, breaking the silence, and then it appeared. The Dark Murder, it was called, the leader of the Veiled Sentry, and the only living

creature who had ever willingly submitted to the Dark Curse. Its attire was similar to that of the other assassins, but this monster was larger in stature. Its turban was an ugly brown and stained with blood, and the feather protruding from it, as well as his veil, was of a dark lavender hue. Where normally there would be green eyes, there was nothing but blackness behind the veil.

Unlike the rest of its companions, its daggers were not the primary weapons it used. Clutched in one hand over its shoulder was a huge, bloodstained Disk Axe. The weapon was an indicator of what the Dark Murder enjoyed about its jobs; it was an assassin, like the others, but where they favored subtle, secretive killing, the Dark Murder enjoyed ruthless destruction, commanding the others to handle the secretive jobs unless it absolutely had to step in.

Garet instinctively placed his hand on the hilt of his sword. He had never liked working with the sentry, and the Dark Murder was particularly unnerving to him. He had once disobeyed Garet's orders to only kill a select few captains of a Tolbi force, opting to nearly slaughter the entire camp before a Psynergetic blast from Garet had stopped the bloodlust.

"The Dark Alchemist has ordered us to hunt down the werewolf Maha. He betrayed the team, and we're have to find him as quickly as possible." He glared at the leader, only slightly chilled by the fact that there was no possible way to read into what the creature was thinking thanks to the absent glow of his eyes. "No killing. We are to apprehend him only. Step out of line again, and I'll not only personally make an example out of you to your men, but the Dark Alchemist will hear from me that you went against his orders, and he'll subject you to what he plans to do to Maha. Understood?"

The Dark Murder gave him an unnoticeable glare in response, but slowly nodded its head.

Feizhi breathed heavily as she knelt upon one knee, glad that the non-stop sprint towards the city of Kalay was finally over. The city was still about a mile away and could be seen from where she and Hama had stopped to rest, but Hama had told her to wait here for reasons she still did not know. Shivering slightly in the cold night, the Xian woman wrapped her cloak around herself. She cast a quick glance around the small clearing, naturally alert, before turning her gaze back to her former mentor. Hama was very still as she leaned against a tree and simply gazed upon the city of Kalay, the home of her brother. Feizhi could not help but admire the serenity of the scene before her. Hama showed not the slightest signs of exhaustion from their running, and was still enough, and beautiful enough in her partner's eyes, to almost be a part of the landscape. With a small smile, Feizhi stood and moved closer to Hama, also looking out to the city.

"*Reveal*," Hama spoke, barely above a whisper. She quickly looked for any possible spies around the clearing, now exposed to the power of her sight, before undoing her Psynergetic spell.

"M-" Feizhi caught herself as she began to speak and shook her head at herself. It was so strange to her that even when their relationship had long since exceeded that of the master and the protégé, she still found herself wanting to refer to Hama by the title she had once held. "...H-Hama. What shall we do now? Do you truly intend to bring Ivan to... him?"

"You already know the answer," Hama said, continuing to look toward the nearby city. "It appears the time has come for me to sever ties with the darkness."

Feizhi tilted her head, puzzled that Hama seemed to be avoiding her gaze. She was about to question this, when the sound of a snapping twig followed by some rustling of shrubs broke the silence. Both women looked toward the surrounding trees. Feizhi took a deep breath, preparing to lunge into an attack if need be, and Hama took a few steps forward and cast her Reveal spell again. After a few moments she spoke softly, "Nobody..."

Feizhi shivered before speaking. "Much danger may yet come to Kalay. The dark warrior may attack when we do not return."

Hama nodded her understanding. "I will not return to him." Her eyes were shut in regret. "But I must ask you to do so, Feizhi."

A silence met her words. Hama finally turned to her friend, seeing what appeared to be a stern look, but Hama could see a sadness behind the eyes.

"I told you it may come to this. You must go back and tell him that we have parted ways."

"I will not refuse an order from you. I just wish to know why."

Hama's face darkened with anger. "That fool Alex made sure that the Dark Alchemist's sights were set on me as one of the possible defectors. I have a reason to betray him, and now he knows it. But you do not. Furthermore, if Ivan and I fail to keep the Dark Star from them, I need to rely on you to take it back from them when you have the chance. You may even acquire vital information of his overall plans, should we

be so lucky. I cannot deny the danger involved, but we both agreed long ago that the safety of Weyard is more important than... us, did we not?"

Hama finally turned her head to look into her younger partner's eyes as she nodded her confirmation. "And if our luck holds out, he may seek to test your loyalty by sending you to kill me, in which case..."

"An escape will be simpler," Feizhi finished.

"You understand, then?"

"I understand that you give me no other choice."

Before Hama could reply, a rustling in nearby bushes caught her attention. She and Feizhi both turned sharply in the direction of the sounds, readying for the worst. A low growl was heard from within the shrubbery, and an aging werewolf clothed in black robes emerged, surveying the area quickly before acknowledging the two women. "I am glad to see you both again."

"Maha," Hama acknowledged back with a slight inclination of her head. "Does Ivan have it, then?"

Maha nodded. "I have explained everything to him. He is waiting for you now at the Kalay palace."

"I see. And what of Tolbi's forces?"

"The battle for the Karagol has come to a stalemate for now. A small group has left the encampment to cross the mountains north of Champa to aid in the coming battle against the ships of Alhafra, although it will undoubtedly prove futile. The journey will take them too long. And even if they were to make it, the city is pinned against the

mountains. The only way out is the sea, and their numbers will undoubtedly prove insufficient to repel Alhafra's sea force."

Hama stayed silent for several seconds, deep in thought. "Champa's fall will be a devastating defeat. We may have to intervene, though I doubt that will win the battle. Even we have limits."

Feizhi suddenly spoke up. "The warriors of Xian still live."

Her companions understood immediately. "They would certainly give Champa the advantage," Maha stated, looking between the two women. "And the route to Champa from the Silk Road will not be as arduous as the mountain trek."

Hama shared a glance with Feizhi, both of them sharing the same thought. "My father would not help Dodonpa, least of all by taking no action," Feizhi stated, the slightest hint of pride in her voice. "He will help to weaken Lunpa's forces."

"Then Ivan and I will go to the Silk Road and request their assistance," Hama said, giving Feizhi a sorrowful look. "The Dark Alchemist will no doubt be suspicious if you were to ask to go yourself, and he probably would not let you in any case. It will have to be me."

"I am in no hurry to see my father again."

Hama let her eyes linger on Feizhi for a moment before turning away to look at the silent Maha. "There is one more thing, Maha. It is probably for the best if you depart somewhere east for the time being, and if not, at least be very careful. The Dark Alchemist has sent Garet to gather the Veiled Sentry and they will be searching for you tonight."

There was a flash of apprehension in Maha's eyes. "I see. Perhaps it is for the best that I return to Kalay with you and then leave with you and Ivan. At the very least, I will be able to lend a hand in keeping the star away from that man. For now, though..." Maha trailed off, his ears twitching. He turned away from the two women and his eyes surveyed the forest behind him, sniffing the air a few times.

"What is it?" Feizhi asked, taking notice of Maha's odd behavior.

"Listen," he spoke. "The wild has grown deathly silent." And indeed, the forest suddenly seemed lacking in sound from bird and beast. "Something is amiss..."

"Are we being watched?" Hama asked in a whisper, her hand creeping toward her concealed dagger.

Maha growled low in his throat. "If so, they seem to be keeping back. In any case, it would be best to conclude this meeting now." The lycanthrope raised the hood of his cloak to hide his face. "I shall search the wild. You go to Kalay without me."

"But the Sentry..."

"I know. But I need to be sure. I shall join you as quick as I can." His ears twitched and he sniffed the air again before departing into the trees, allowing his instincts to aid in his search.

The two women were silent for several agonizing seconds, watching the retreating form of Maha as long as they could to keep from addressing each other. It was not until she heard a blade being unsheathed did Hama turn around to face Feizhi, who had unsheathed one of her two small, but very sharp daggers. She was surprised to see her etch a cut

in her right cheek, flinching a bit from the pain and the sensation of her blood. She then made several rather large tears in her left sleeve before putting away the blade.

Looking up to see her partner's questioning glance, the corners of Feizhi's lips turned upward in a sly manner. "I think I should do my best to convince him that I am loyal to his task."

The Jupiter Adept could not help but give her a slight smile. "It never occurred to me, but yes, that is a good idea."

Another still, uncomfortable silence passed between the two women.

"Still... you had better treat those cuts soon before they... before they get worse."

Feizhi boldly strode forward and wrapped her arms around a surprised Hama, who automatically reciprocated the gesture. Feizhi pressed her lips against Hama's for the briefest of seconds before pulling back and whispering.

"Some things are far more painful."

"I will not let him have the star."

"That is not what I meant."

"I know."

Feizhi moved away from Hama with one more smile, and then she turned and began to sprint away from the forest clearing, never looking back.

Hama watched her leave for only a few seconds before turning away. She knew she could not afford to lose her

resolve now. With a deep breath, she began to sprint with the wind once more to complete her journey to the city of Kalay and to her brother.

One of the bushes around the empty clearing suddenly began to rustle, and out of thin air, the figure in black appeared as he stepped into the moonlit clearing holding the Cloak Ball in his hands, having heard every word of the exchange. He barely reacted to the animalistic growl behind him, staring straight ahead. Maha, his form almost entirely encased in thick shrubbery, hidden like a predator, stayed low to the ground on all fours, ready to pounce if need be.

"W-what are we to do with this?" Conservato and the other elder Lemurians crowded around the Mythrill bag containing the dark star of water.

Alex had to resist the urge to shake his head in frustration. "I made it simple enough. Just keep it safe. Hide it under that big table, for all I care. Just refrain from the desire to pass it around and tell everyone what it is, and you will be fine." His piece said, the Alchemist raised a hood over his head and walked out of the Lemurian Senate building. A smirk appeared on his face as he heard the usual arguing within the building as the old relics who had assumed control of this once proud city bickered over the deal with the devil they had once so readily made.

He felt many golden eyes on him, awed by his presence. Like the water that permeated this city, he seemed to glide gracefully through the city, his steps covered by his cerulean cloak. Only once in a long while did any of them get the chance to see him, and they seemed to understand and fearfully respect what he represented; they knew that the power many of them had once feared would destroy

Weyard and them along with it now rested in his hands. Only a portion, perhaps, but only he knew that.

Alex stopped before the fountain of the city, it's clear waters seemingly brimming with life-prolonging energy. With a single hand, he scooped a tiny portion out and drank it. His energy revitalized almost immediately, he made his way to Lemuria's secret entrance that would return him to the water caves. He walked down the steps that turned from marble to gray stone, and onto the grassy piece of land that was a dead end to anybody without a boat.

The Alchemist did not stop walking, however, and with every step Alex took, the calm waters of Lemuria's silent marina were frozen solid as he made his way through the cavern, creating his own road. He could easily have teleported himself away by now with a single thought, just as he had done to arrive at this shipyard, but the blue-haired man could not help but admire the architecture of the ancient ships of Lemuria. It seemed shameful that the products of such careful craftsmanship had been left to become relics of a bygone era. They served as more saddening reminders of an age whose doom had been planned long before the birth of thousands of its children.

Focus, Alex chastised himself. You are not here to sight-see...

But he knew that for all his changes through the years, his heart had always been that of a scholar. To discover the mysteries of this world was his calling. The city had held a certain wonder about it, itself a relic of grander times. The old days... the golden days.

He knew what the others thought of him. A pitiful cynic with a frozen heart who tried his damndest to construct reasons

to look down upon all others. And indeed, though the wonders of human achievement were not beyond his ability to admire, they were not enough to vanquish his contempt of human ills. He would never deny that. Even the people of this very city that filled Alex with such wonder had proven themselves inept and unworthy of the glory that surrounded them, not only willingly hiding away while the world withered, but easily controlled by those in league with the Dark Alchemist.

And yet, it was not the doom of Weyard's people he craved. Not when he could plainly see that the desire to create and persevere still existed. But he could not leave them to their own devices. The people of Weyard would undoubtedly fail if he were to give in to pure chance, just a roll of the lucky dice. The future required an overseer. Someone who could not only understand the beauty of creation, but could adjust it at will, as a scholar might his records in need of updating. If gaining such power meant succumbing to darkness, then so be it.

No, he was not watching society crumble, as that fool had accused him of. He was personally ensuring the growth of a prosperous future. The only future that he knew was worth fighting for, that was worth killing for...

No matter who had to die.

The icy road melted, cracked apart, and dissolved into the dark waters without a trace.

"You knew that I was here the whole time."

"I had a suspicion. So what brings you here, Alchemist? Are you here to beat that Garet to the prize of my head?"

"I am under no orders to bring you to the Dark Alchemist, as the Mars Adept is, and so that is not my intent. However, I *am* here to put an end to your rebellion."

"And what would the difference be?"

"I plan to bring you under the influence of my curse. To put it simply, I do not trust you to keep yourself safe from the Veiled Sentry, and I do not want them to take you to the Dark Alchemist."

"Why would you do this? Are you rebelling against him as well?"

"Against his orders of subjecting you to his wrath, to be sure. But against his plans to enshroud this world, as most of you are... well, that is another question, and one I cannot answer."

"So you know... does your partner know about our disloyalty?"

"I would imagine he has his suspicions. However, betrayal is the least of his worries. He is only using all of you to acquire what he desires for himself."

"It sounds as though you do not agree with his plans."

"Enough talk. There is no time left. You will surrender to the Dark Curse, or suffer a most ungracious fate."

"There is no difference between the two in my eyes. Consider your offer denied."

"I warned you."

Maha readied himself and moved slightly to the left into some brush, letting his wild nature awaken. "Your move, then."

"No."

Maha relaxed his tensed muscles, but held his position. He watched as the man took calm steps forward through the clearing, leaving himself wide open for attack. What was he doing?

"Not my move," the man in black spoke as he walked into the shadows of the trees and the Cloak Ball erased him from view. Almost immediately following that, Maha howled in pain as a burning blast of fire Psynergy struck him and sent him rolling along the ground. Clenching his teeth, he looked up to see Gareth, and behind him, various pairs of red and green eyes watching him from the darkness of the forest. Maha expelled a breath of simultaneous rage and fear.

"Give up, werewolf," the Mars Adept whispered, just loud enough for Maha to hear. "He might just lessen your punishment if you go quietly." Another burst of flame struck Maha and he felt his body painfully collide with a tree. The lycanthrope panted heavily as he slowly looked up to see Gareth closing in, his left palm raised in warning, and his right hand clutching his broadsword.

"I do not intend to go quietly," Maha growled. "*Whirlwind!*" Calling upon his Psynergy, a cloud of dust and grass flew up, obscuring him from view. Maha rolled away from the tree anticipating the blast of Psynergetic fire Gareth sent towards him, hitting the tree and leaving small embers that quickly dissipated. Then, with a unexpected burst of speed, the werewolf took to his feet and fled through the trees of the forest.

"Get him! And remember, don't kill him!" At his command, the Veiled Sentry broke off into the darkness of the trees as well. Gareth prepared to give chase until he sensed something behind him. Slowly turning his head, the Dark Murder soon entered his view. The creature was just standing, watching the events unfold. A silence passed between man and monster before Gareth muttered, "If I were you, I'd start moving. Now."

The Dark Murder seemed to turn its head slightly to finally acknowledge him, and an ugly growl responded from beyond the veil. Then, without warning, it looked back at the path and took off at a sprint, running on a much different path than his fellow assassins. Apparently, the ruthless creature had been able to discern where Maha was going beyond his men's abilities. If that was so, then Maha truly was doomed.

For the greater good.

Through bushes and in between trees, Maha attempted to lose his pursuers through a series of complicated twists and turns within the forest that he had memorized.

Unfortunately, it did not seem to be working. It seemed that every time he found an opening to escape the forest and make his way across the plains again, the red and green eyes would be there in the shadows, threatening him to come closer. They were as adept at navigating this forest as much as him.

Maha stopped to quickly rest between two trees, cursing himself for being fooled by the Dark Alchemist. But had he truly been fooled? Only now had he stopped and thought about the man's demeanor during their conversation. Had he truly wanted to help him escape Gareth? Well, Maha

reasoned to himself, even if he had been genuine, the idea of being placed under his control was unbearable, even if it would keep him safe. When his ears picked up the sound of the assassins closing in, he silently declared his rest time over and sprinted away once again.

As he found himself trapped by the eyes once again at another turn to escape the forest, Maha was forced to make a sharp turn behind a tree on the path as daggers suddenly began flying from the shadows, all aimed at non-lethal points on his body, thrown by expert killers. Summoning up what little attack spells he could use, Maha growled low in his throat, "*Plasma.*"

An explosion of light behind his tree, that he hoped would distract them long enough, was his signal to start moving again, fatigued as he already was. From the grunts he heard, he could tell he had taken them by surprise and had forcefully broken up the group. This time, however, he stayed low as he swiftly made his way through the brush and tall grass of this particular area. He was going to have to attack if he was going to survive. Letting his hunting instincts drive him, he watched through the tiniest crack in the blades of grass at one particular Slayer that had hit more directly by the spell and was further away from the others.

Wasting no time, Maha charged, calling up a burst of wind to once again hide his movement as he leapt with a roar onto the creature, knocking it onto his back, and in one swift motion, sank his jaws into his throat and tore at it. The Slayer choked, an ugly guttural sound as black blood stained the grass below. Its green eyes slowly faded from view as they shut. Feeling no remorse through his animalistic rage, Maha seized the pack of weapons the Slayer had been carrying, slung it over his neck and was off again. Behind him, an Assassin flung a dagger which caught

him on one of his legs, sending him sprawling with a howl of pain.

Maha quickly grabbed the dagger and pulled it out of leg, ignoring the blood flow. In desperation, he cast another Plasma spell to hold them off before running off again, now with a limp and still holding the dagger. As a result, he did not get far before something of immeasurable strength collided with him in a body blow, accompanied by a horrifying roar that made the blood of the werewolf run cold. The Dark Murder had found him.

Maha was sent through branches and shrubbery and finally into the mud of a small clearing area, the bag of weapons and the dagger flying off into the mud. He looked up to see the demon leap into the clearing with him, slamming its Disk Axe into the ground and starting toward him.

Maha growled and lashed out with his claws at the killer, who easily avoided his strikes. The werewolf's enraged attack was quickly ended by a swift punch across the face, and then a kick in the stomach that sent him flying backwards. The monster was going to beat him into submission to avoid killing him, Maha realized through the pained haze in his head. As the Dark Murder closed in for another punch, Maha dodged the hit and pounced, sinking his teeth into the enormous hand. The assassin let out a breath of pain before bringing the werewolf close enough to smash its knee his stomach. Maha released the hand, but lashed out and slashed the Dark Murder's chest. It responded by clasping its hands together and bringing them down in an overhead smash on his head, sending him back to the cold ground.

Already, the beaten lycanthrope could feel exhaustion threatening to take hold from the heavy hits. He looked up

to see the assassin raise one heavy boot to bring down upon one of his legs and break it, and quickly rolled away, feeling the force of the crushing stomp on the ground nonetheless, filling him with fear at what almost was. Maha looked around as he got to his feet to see that the rest of the Veiled Sentry was approaching. The Dark Murder, however, let out another roar and waved them off, indicating its desire to finish him off alone. The Slayers and Assassins obeyed, keeping behind to watch, and the leader charged at Maha, ready to end the struggle.

As his senses returned, Maha charged as well, giving the illusion of a full-frontal assault before sliding along the ground past the feet of the Dark Murder. As the lumbering thing turned to look at him, Maha gave an enraged snarl and leapt into the air, now clutching the dagger he had dropped moments ago and a Bramble Seed from the fallen bag. Flinging the enchanted seed at the monster's feet, it let out a roar of pain as dozens of thorny branches suddenly sprouted and pierced its skin. Enraged, it lashed out with its heavyset arms and tore the branches into pieces in seconds. However, in its momentary surprise, the Dark Murder could not stop Maha before he jammed the dagger through the seemingly empty space behind the veil and into one of its eyes.

The monster let out a horrifying scream that sounded bizarrely unnatural; it was a sound that nothing could or should ever make. Maha tried to back away, but the Dark Murder clasped its mighty hand around his throat before he could, still clutching at the dagger and finally pulling it out, causing a burst of black blood. It flung the dagger away with its own snarl.

Still clutching the werewolf by the throat, the Dark Murder clenched its free hand and smashed it into Maha's chest.

Then another punch followed. And another. Feeling like his bones were broken, Maha was flung aside by the Dark Murder, and lay on the ground, exhausted. His attacker seemed to shrug off the immense pain it had clearly been put through, as if gaining a second wind from the pain. The Dark Murder made its way over to the beaten werewolf and brought its leg up once again over Maha's own leg. This time, Maha was too tired to move away. The crushing blow landed, and Maha's world was nothing but horrific pain before everything went black.

Its task done, the leader of the assassins fell to one knee, exhausted and in pain for the first time in years. Its fellow assassins moved forward into the clearing, as did Gareth, who had arrived to see the end of the fight.

The azure man smiled as the assassins dropped the bound body of Maha to the ground at his feet. The werewolf was in pain from his broken leg, but still looked down to the ground in anger and defiance. He would not show shame to the man before him.

"Good work. I must admit, Gareth, I had my suspicions about you, but you have done a great service to us. I see the werewolf put up a fight to the end." He motioned to the bleeding Dark Murder, who was now standing still despite its injuries, holding a torch in its hand.

Garet barely acknowledged the monster. "Sure. Now, I *am* going to be the one to bring Isaac to you, right? You promised me that."

"I made no such promise." At Gareth's affronted look, the dark being silenced him with a look. "I said that I might consider letting you do so, and indeed I am considering it now."

However, if you keep this up, not only will you not fight him, but I will station you miles away from Vale when we attack. Now be silent." Gareth nodded and stepped back, looking down at the ground.

The Dark Alchemist began to look around the clearing where the group, or what was left of it, had reconvened against his own expectations. Clearly, many things had changed over the course of a few hours.

He focused on Feizhi as he noted her wounds, and stepped closer to her. "What is this, then? Where is your dear partner?"

The young woman held her anger inside as she spoke, "Master Hama has betrayed our cause. She would not harm her brother. I remain loyal to the cause, and so I faced her in battle."

The azure man nodded his cloaked head. "Interesting. Although those wounds seem greatly precise for what was assuredly a fierce battle..."

Feizhi felt her blood go cold as she remained silent. However, a voice was then heard approaching the clearing. "Do not worry. It is quite true. I saw the fight myself." She and the blue man turned to see the man in black, the other Dark Alchemist. "She has remained loyal to us indeed." Feizhi looked at the man in black in confusion. Why was he lying to the one whom he had the greatest connection to? Was he on their side rather than his?

"I see," The leader smiled at Feizhi, who did not return it as she was still more confused than anything else. "Do not worry about her. You will soon find comfort in the gloriousness of darkness. Trust me."

"I... will try."

As the man in azure moved away from Feizhi, he began to look around, noticing another member of the cult seemed to be missing.

"Do not bother," Alex called, resting against a tree. "Felix left his post to go to Vale. There is no doubt in my mind that he has gone to warn them of the impending attack."

"Then it would appear my suspicions were correct about him." A freezing wind emanating from the blue man made the entire group shiver. "Two betrayals, and no further along than we were before. What a shame. However, we now have a prisoner." He looked down at the werewolf. "How about it, Master Maha? Is there anything of worth you would like to tell us? I assume from Master Hama's betrayal, the Jupiter Adept that is her brother has the dark star of Jupiter, then?"

Maha refused to talk.

"I will take your silence as a confirmation. In that case, I know where to attack next. I humbly thank you, and regret that I must do this."

Maha scoffed, finally speaking, his voice cracking from the pain of his leg. "No... you do... not. You may have... fooled everyone else... but I see through you. You monster. You are a monster..."

The Dark Alchemist frowned. "If you wish for your final thoughts to be of pain and rage, so be it. I made my terms clear that dissent would be met with vengeance. And now, as we approach the eleventh hour of the world, I can accept nothing else but death for betrayers. And so it is that your death shall be an awakening of an ancient tradition." With his piece said, he raised a hand and Maha's body began to

rise and float through the air before being placed atop a massive pile of combustible wood laying in the middle of the clearing, soaked in oil. "Purification."

The azure man shut his eyes regretfully for the group to see. "I am sorry that this must be done. But let this be a reminder of what awaits for those who would turn their back on the beauty of Dark Alchemy. There can be none who would willingly leave the shadows if we are to have peace in this world." He turned back around to face the pyre. "Make your own peace now, werewolf. With your death, so too will the last remnants of a brutal time die with you. History will look upon you with respect and sadness. The last werewolf, burned away by his own ignorance. A relic. A traitor. A hero to his people. And so be it."

Maha remained silent. Inwardly, he apologized to the memories of his slain people of Garoh, to which he had promised to avenge them by helping to bring an end to the war that plagued Weyard. War... a concept which the werewolves had distanced themselves from for so long. The ultimate and most foolish staple of mankind, which werewolf evolution had helped him and his people to rise above.

The man in blue turned to the Dark Murder. "Light the pyre." The Dark Murder growled in response, and made its way over to the wood and wolf. For a moment, it seemed to acknowledge Maha silently. It stared directly at him, and Maha stared back. For what purpose the creature looked upon him for so long, he would never know. He was not even sure if the assassin knew itself why it did so. Then, without a sound, the werewolf's executioner dropped the torch onto the wood.

Maha looked up the shining moon above and let out a long, mournful howl as loud as he possibly could. He hoped

someone would hear it. He hoped other werewolves that perhaps lurked the forests of Weyard would be able to hear it. And if so, he hoped that whoever heard it would somehow be able to understand his pain and the sacrifice he had made for the world, and perhaps set their sights on a stronger life because of it. It was all he had ever hoped to give to a constantly changing world.

The burning continued for a long time, the dark group watching the entire thing. Feizhi looked away, holding back the immense sadness and tears, swearing to somehow avenge his death. Gareth clenched his fists unbearably tightly and told himself he had been justified in bringing this about. Alex watched, his face absent of any kind of emotion, inwardly feeling saddened that he had never had the chance to converse with the werewolf of his scholarly learning through the ages. The man in black simply watched, no emotion on his face, and no thoughts in his head.

The leader watched with a regretful expression on his face, only allowing himself to smile and laugh behind his unseen mask.

Disclaimer: What a bastard. What kind of sick mind comes up with a character like that? Anyway, I do not own the Golden Sun series.

Some of you will probably notice how long it took to put this up. While I don't think I'll take as long getting the next one up, it's a pretty good indicator of how I expect this to work. The passion I had for this story has died and been revived many times over the years, and right now it's holding on by a thread. In other words, I'm not making this story top priority like I used to. At this point, I'm just putting it up to

put something up because I still genuinely enjoy writing this stuff, and its been sitting on my computer forever, so I figured I might as well depress a few people with how I take a mostly optimistic series and give it an unnecessarily dark turn. Isn't the first, won't be the last, I'm sure. Also, the possibility of someone still being somewhat interested in reading it is also a plus.

On a more important note, it goes without saying that is strictly in its own universe. A sort of, "what if Dark Dawn never happened" thing. I have never played Dark Dawn and probably won't be able to for a long time, so things are not going to be meshing with that at all. Hell, it barely meshes with the original games because I'm not good with story details involving Alchemy. This is an old story and an old concept and it shows, so going with the flow is crucial. Then again, since most of this story is just an excuse to write a lot of fun fight scenes, you probably already guessed that. Thanks for reading. See you in another couple of years.

***Chapter 4*: Chapter 4**

The Wrath of Dark Alchemy.

Incursion: The Storm Begins

There was no mistaking it now. He had hoped against hope that they would not find the place where, for all his power, he was most vulnerable. He had always known that he would soon have to come into conflict with them, and it was a day that he had feared for a very long time. It was not a fear of them that made the fated day so daunting to him, however, but a fear that the little he still held dear in this world would be torn asunder when the conflict began. He had stopped fearing for his own life a long time ago.

Far away, but loud and clear in his mind was a long mournful howl of a creature of this world that had desired nothing but peace and a successful pursuit of knowledge for all, only to have his dreams and aspirations burned away as well.

"I'm sorry, Maha."

Azure eyes opened from a deep and sorrowful meditation, and levitating rocks carried by a cool breeze fell to earth again as the wind disappeared, and nearby waters stopped churning in small waves, and the campfire that had been spiraling from its center of being died down to a normal blaze.

With a wave of a hand, the fire was extinguished, and a brown and very old traveler's pack was slung over one shoulder. A sheathed sword was fastened, and the sound of boots quickly striking earth echoed through a dark cave before a shadow graced the land of Weyard. The running would not stop until the destination had been reached.

There was so little time left.

All was dark.

The pyre was extinguished, and the last few embers of the blaze vanished as they were set upon by thousands of droplets of the blackest liquid. It was only a Psynesergetic representation of the liquid of life, twisted by darkness, but the element which the spell represented still coursed through it and gave it the power to vanquish its ever-opposing element.

Nothing remained now but ash, smoke, and memories. Memories which ended with a vision of agony. A fitting introduction to the horror of what was to transpire on this night.

With a single word, the fates of many were sealed, tragically brought upon by a lost soul—or two, perhaps—both loved and scorned, returning home at last. But there would be no mercy for either on this night, when the shadows made their move to descend upon them once again, for the darkness suffers no opposition.

"Now."

The two enshrouded creators of this wicked gathering began to focus their minds as black rings of Psynesergetic energy surrounded their forms. Both joined hands, a left and a right, and their combined strength kicked up a wind that swept the leaves of the trees around them for at least a mile. Their minds simultaneously envisioned the same image as they prepared to manifest their mental desires into the physical world.

At once, high above the sleeping Valean settlement, something began to appear against the night sky. A black mass was taking shape; small at first, it slowly grew larger and larger. It was as though clouds had joined together and began to spiral like a tornado. The dark cyclone in the sky seemed to let out a dull roar of wind as it completed its formation.

Purple flashes of Jupiter energy—yellow flashes of Venus energy—red flashes of Mars energy—blue flashes of Mercury energy—all were visible for seconds and then vanished into the blackest energy of Alchemy's eternal opposite. A sound like thunder seemingly made the ground shake and the cyclone began to spin even faster.

In the air, two voices intoned...

"Elemental Void..."

All was silent.

Sheba downed the warm tea before setting the cup down, letting out a sigh as it soothed her sore throat. She could only look down into the cup, trying not to look into the golden eyes of her Lemurian friend. The silence soon became unbearable, however, and she looked up, somewhat relieved that the blue-haired man was looking down, reading one of the many books he kept on the ship.

Sheba examined the book in his hands; the cover depicted a sailor proudly standing aboard his ship, battling a Kraken that stood between him and a stunning sunrise on the horizon, made clear by the parting blanket of grayness that had once obscured the golden light from leading the way.

She looked up to see him staring right back at her, golden eyes shining with a weathered maturity that betrayed the youthful face, a presence that only decades upon decades of experiences, good and ill, could give rise to. Sheba immediately broke the stare and gazed back at the cup in her hands.

"I do not understand why you are so afraid to look at me, Sheba." His voice was kind, with a hint of amusement.

Sheba felt her face grow a bit warm. "I just hate it when people see me cry."

"Crying is natural," he replied in such a tone that would probably lead some to suspect condescension, but Sheba knew better. It was a bait, an invitation to explain, and one she silently resolved not to take.

Piers sighed and looked back at his book. "Well, in any case, it is not something you should feel at all ashamed over. This is a trying time, to put it in the nicest terms possible."

"It's hard for all of us, but I don't see *you* weeping about it."

"You should not mistake a lack of tears for a sign of strength, Sheba. It is not that I do not cry, it is that I do not cry *anymore*. The one and only day you saw me cry is the day I lost that ability."

Sheba looked up at the mariner again, and instantly felt a surge of pity and affection towards him. She did remember. She remembered the tears that fell freely as he stood within the graveyard of Lemurians long gone.

"In many ways, I consider certain parts of myself to have died in that graveyard on that day, alongside... her. I made a

promise that I would not shed tears again. That is not something I am proud of."

Silence followed, filling the cabin once again. The boat, resting on a river that fed the woods of the Valean settlement, creaked as it seemed to drift lazily from side to side. The waters could be heard splashing gently against the hull.

"You know I am always here when you need me."

"Thank you, Piers." Sheba smiled, more to herself than to her Lemurian friend. Indeed, he had been there for her longer than perhaps he even realized.

Before he had joined their group, all those years ago, Sheba had admired the close friendship Jenna and Felix had that complemented their familial bond, and had wanted something similar to that. She remembered latching on to the mariner immediately, jokingly calling him her new big brother.

In retrospect, she supposed she must have been quite the nuisance at times, yet he had always humored her silliness.

Sheba let out a giggle, and Piers looked up from his reading with a smile of his own. "Whatever it is you're thinking, hold onto it. If it is at all possible, I'd like to see you like this more often."

"I'll try. And Piers? I wanted to thank you..."

"You already did," Piers pointed out with mirth.

Sheba rolled her eyes with a laugh. "Hold on, let me finish. I wanted to thank you for staying with us. You mentioned

once that Lemuria was facing trouble. You could have left to be with them long ago. You didn't."

Piers looked thoughtful for a second. "Perhaps... I will not deny that I have been tempted to return, but for the moment, it is far safer than almost anywhere else. All of you needed my help more than the Lemurians. Additionally, you are all just as important to me as they are."

"I'll take that as a wordy 'you're welcome'," Sheba quipped with a smirk.

"You would be correct."

"If you don't mind me asking, what *is* going on at Lemuria these days?"

Piers frowned as his eyes continued to scan the pages of the book he was only half-reading now. "Its troubles are occurring from the inside. King Hydros' rule has been failing. Under his leadership, Lemuria was to open our gates, so to speak, to the world again. Envoys were sent out and returned with fatalities and damaged boats. It was unusually cruel timing that the war began just weeks after the King was prepared to take the first necessary step into bringing Lemuria into a changing Weyard.

"Naturally, he was blamed by Conservato and the Senate for having a hand in this war by allowing our mission to be completed, and claimed that the blood of those we lost were on his hands. The people accepted their claims with open arms, and the Senate seized control of the throne. The King has since remained in isolation. Only Lunpa and my uncle have stood by Hydros, and uncle probably only did it for my sake."

"I'm sorry," Sheba said, looking down from Piers' saddened face. "I probably shouldn't have asked..."

"You had a right to know," Piers said, flipping a page. "It concerns all of us, after all. In the end, we did what we had to do. Sadly, there is just no reasoning with the likes of Conservato."

They sat in companionable silence again, and then Piers set the book down, fixing Sheba with a serious look. "You spoke to Felix tonight."

"You were watching us?" Sheba immediately regretted her accusatory tone, knowing she did not deserve to use it.

"No, I was watching Vale. I then happened to see the two of you speaking through my telescope. You know Jenna would not approve of this."

"I know, Piers. I didn't ask to be caught in the middle like this. The last thing I want is to betray either of their trust. One way or the other, it'll turn out to be a bad situation."

"So you intend to keep this a secret?"

"I don't have a choice."

"Yes, you do."

Sheba was prepared to retort, but then stopped when a violent chill suddenly ran through her body as she began to sense... something. Piers' own widened eyes told her that she was not alone in feeling this chill.

It was similar to the usual sensation of feeling the presence of Psynergy or some Psynesergetic phenomenon, but somehow

the two Adepts could tell... this was something entirely different.

Simultaneously, the two rose from their seats without a word and made their way towards the cabin door, Piers in the lead. Exiting the interior, their widened eyes were at once met with the sight of the Valean settlement in the distance, still quiet and undisturbed, and something taking shape in the sky above it.

Without fully realizing why, the two Adepts instantly broke into a run towards the settlement.

Two years had passed, and she looked just as sad as she had then, even in her sleep. Felix had little doubt that not even her dreams could offer her solace, and even worse, that he was probably the subject of some of those dreams. Or nightmares, rather.

Felix castigated himself for reminiscing at such a time, and steeled his resolve as he firmly, but gently took hold of her shoulder and shook her to end her sleep. Jenna stirred, a sigh of sleepiness escaping her as she slowly opened her eyes. At once, a gasp filled the silence of the room and Jenna shot upright and backed away from Felix.

Ignoring the pain she had unintentionally caused him—though he knew he certainly deserved it and more—he raised his hands in a sign of submission and spoke slowly. "Jenna... calm down. It's... it's me."

Long and tense seconds passed as Jenna looked upon the last remaining family she had, her face one of confusion, which changed to understanding, and finally an expression that existed somewhere between happiness and sadness. Silent as a ghost, she strode over to her brother and

wrapped her arms around him, tears falling as she felt the reciprocation of the gesture.

"Is this... is this a dream? Am I dreaming?" Her voice was a whisper, almost fearful, as she waited for the imagery to melt away and to be left looking up at the barely visible ceiling, watching shadows dance from the candlelight and silently wishing one of them would miraculously take the form of the man who stood before her now.

"It's real, Jenna," Felix whispered back, barely able to reconcile the fact that this was the reunion he had imagined for years finally occurring. "I'm home."

He allowed himself to revel in the moment for only a few seconds longer before gently pushing her back. "Listen to me, Jenna. We don't have much time."

Jenna looked up at her brother's face, immediately worried to see a look of utmost fear and urgency. "What? What are you talking about?"

"Just listen to me and don't ask questions. An attack on Vale is about to happen, and we have to move quickly. The elders have to be warned so we can start moving everybody to the caverns before it happens. And we—the four of us—need to be ready to fight. I'm going to the elders now. Do you think you can fight? I know you're sick..."

"I... I can fight," Jenna replied, her head swimming with this new information before his last utterance made itself clear to her. "How... did you know I was sick?"

Felix did not answer, slowly expelling a breath, avoiding the look his sister was sending his way.

"How?" Jenna asked, more forceful this time. "No one even knows except..." Despite the painful haze in her head from her lingering fever, Jenna thought back to various times in months past that Sheba had disappeared for short or long whiles before returning, often explaining her sudden departures as needing time to think or taking a walk. "Look at me, Felix."

Felix did so, his eyes meeting hers. His head was full of excuses and lies to tell to spare her more pain, each less credible than the last. And even if he had been able to find a suitable lie that would convince her, he did not think he could bring himself to once again be dishonest; not when he was looking into the eyes of the person most important to him in this world.

"Jenna..."

"Felix, just answer me, and then I won't say anything more and we'll handle whatever's coming. Have you been meeting with Sheba these past months?"

"...Yes."

Jenna simply nodded before turning away. "Alright. Go."

"Jenna-"

"You said we had to hurry. Go and inform the elders. I need to get ready too. Just go."

Without another word, Felix turned and departed from the house. Quickly as he could, he ran through the village, the houses like blurs to him as he ran towards his destination, knowing exactly where to go and how to get there.

Many times he had surveyed the town, examining and memorizing every house and every turn in the main road of the village, if it could even be called a road. Always from a distance, and always with the feeling of being weighted down by such a terrible burden, he simply watched.

He had always felt like he was being pushed towards the town by something, but at the same time being pulled away by something else. To have the opportunity to walk forward and feel true happiness for the first time in years, and then be reminded that such an opportunity was completely out of his reach, no matter how close it seemed... such was an ordeal Felix would never wish upon anybody.

And now, today at last, he had finally truly been able to seize that opportunity, and the victory could only be described as feeling... hollow. The immeasurable joy caused by seeing and speaking to Jenna again had been an elating feeling, but it could not completely sweeten the bitterness that permeated his mind and body. The sickly feeling of being a traitor and a liar. And now here he stood, a liar and a traitor to two sides he had played for so long.

Indeed he was doomed to forever be on the outside, looking in and knowing that the joy that potentially waited for him would never be realized. Between good and bad, positive and negative, light and dark... there he stood... an ever-present, and yet barely existing entity.

But what he did not understand and had never understood was that his choices also were ever-present and yet barely existing. Even now, having forsaken one for the other, he could not have foreseen that his first true decision in so long would, in the end, be meaningless.

He was not too far from the Vale sanctum, a monument to the healers and elders of the town, before a horrible chill swept his body. Felix looked skyward to see a mass of blackness beginning to take shape, completely noticeable even against a black and cloudy sky.

Felix swore under his breath as his blood ran cold. They were making their move far more quickly than he had anticipated.

Suddenly, the doors of the sanctum were pushed open as two of Vale's healers made their way outside, their faces masks of confusion as they too looked to the heavens and sensed an energy unlike any other they had ever felt before, along with an anxiety unfelt before.

"What is this?!"

"This energy... it feels like Psynergy, but..."

"Listen!" At once, the two healers looked forward to see Felix, and their confusion seemed to increase ten-fold, if that were possible.

"Felix?"

"You... you're back! Where have you-"

"Quiet! Just listen. There is going to be an attack on Vale. We must get everyone to the caverns safely. Sound the alarm and begin gathering the healers and all able-bodied Adepts in the village. Now!"

"Y-yes... as you wish!"

"I'll get the elder!"

One of the healers turned and strode back into the sanctum, while the other raised his hand and focused on a recently built wooden bell tower that overlooked the town. The bell began to rapidly chime on its own, aided by the healer's Psynergy, signifying danger to the Valeans as it had done numerous times before. Every villager knew that when the bell chimed, the war had seeped through the natural barriers that kept them safe, and it was time to leave the town behind and make for the safe caverns beneath the mountains.

Felix had not remained to see the preparations, instead immediately running off after the healers had signified their understanding of his instructions, and making his way into the center of the town, directly below the black spiraling void where the howling winds were strongest. Flashes of elemental Psynergy were seen in the black shadow like lightning behind dark clouds before vanishing into the blackness once more, as if they had never existed.

Two cries of Felix's name were heard above the din of the winds, and he turned to see Piers and Sheba running towards him. The townspeople had begun to emerge from their houses, some breaking into a run north to the mountains immediately, some stopping to look above at the blackness, dumbstruck by this strange phenomenon. Scattered screams were heard as a thundering quake struck fear into the souls of everyone in Vale.

And then the void was silent.

It was impossible to know which of the dark elements had struck first.

All was chaos.

Screams rang out as black meteor-like blasts of Psynesergetic fire rained down from the void, drowned out by the sound of many small explosions that occurred with each collision with the ground. The dark night was illuminated by a ghastly amethyst glow that followed each strike of black lightning. Black shards of ice and orbs of water rained down with blue flashes of energy, as if to signify the element of Mercury desperately escaping an icy prison before dissipating. Black Psynesergetic constructs of swords rained down and pierced the earth, resulting in many dazzling blasts of yellow light.

Some were sent flying by the explosions, some were struck by the energy constructs directly, and some desperately constructed shields of energy to protect themselves to no avail. Some rose from the ground, wounded and frightened, and some remained until the day came when their bodies would be buried.

One minute of pure chaos and hell passed and then was over. Those who did not survive the barrage from the heavens filled the tormented thoughts of those who had loved them and lived to tell the tale of how they had perished. Those who survived fled from the terror of the blackness, moving north for the safety of walls of pure stone.

Lavender eyes widened in fear as a realization was made, brought on by a remembrance of a horrifying vision in the form of a dream. Calling upon the power of the wind, she raced towards the north gate of the Valean settlement and gave a mighty wave of her enchanted staff, sending a torrent of wind towards the second wave of terror about to descend upon the hapless townsfolk.

The cursed ones were either slowed or sent flying by the wind, and in that moment, fate itself was changed. With a scream of warning, the wind wielder instructed the townsfolk

to move back into the town and find another route to their safety. Tripping and stumbling, they ran, knowing that the momentary distraction brought about by one of their great protectors would not last for too long.

Cackles and roars of delight filled the air, intermingling with the screams and cries of the frightened, and a light rain began to fall from the clouds above. The fearful void was gone, but its presence was still felt deep within the souls of those who had experienced its terrible power. Flashes of lightning brightened the sky, and so the war for Vale had begun.

Standing alone between the army of Lunpa and the fleeing Valeans, Sheba raised her staff into the air for a few moments, gathering the wind's power once again, before slamming it into the ground, sending a powerful driving current of air towards the attackers, which flipped many onto their backs. It was all she could do to buy time for the Valeans to escape, knowing she could not defeat every last one of the brigands. From the looks of their numbers surging out of the woods, they looked to be about a hundred strong, maybe more.

"Spark Plasma!"

At least five were downed by the powerful spell, leaving far too many remaining. Like insects escaping from a discovered nest, the Lunpa men broke through the northern barrier of the town and began to swarm, intent on bringing destruction to every last corner. Unable to stem the tide any longer, Sheba turned and ran back through the town to gain a more defensive position.

As she entered the plaza, five men that had broken off from the horde surrounded her and charged. Sheba parried a strike, sent a blast of wind to her left, and ducked low to avoid a swing of a sword behind her. Driving her staff into the stomach of the offending thief behind her, and then a blow to the stomach of the one in front of her, she then thrust the staff upwards horizontally, violently smashing both ends into the chins of both men, knocking them both to the ground.

"Spark Plasma!"

All around her were flashes of white light as more bolts of Jupiter Psynergy struck the ground, sending the Lunpa men flying. Only a Lunpa soldier, more armored than the brigands, remained of the group rallying to kill her specifically.

Sheba parried more killing strikes from the soldier, struggling against his swordplay no doubt borne from more intense training than the thieves had received. She blocked a left strike, then parried a slice at her legs, and then held the staff up to block an overhead strike which was swiftly followed by a kick to her stomach, staggering her.

Desperately, she slammed her staff into the ground, a burst of wind sending mud and grass upwards and into the soldier's face and eyes. He yelled in irritation, falling back. Sheba was about to press her advantage when he reached into a small pack at his waist and pulled out a small, black spherical object and flung it at her.

The object exploded on impact with the ground, creating a thick, black cloud of smoke that enveloped Sheba. A smoke bomb. Coughing, the Jupiter Adept blindly waved her staff, dissipating the smog in seconds, but she was still

disoriented. Blinking her burning eyes rapidly, Sheba finally managed to focus as she caught a glimpse of the soldier directly in front of her.

She let out a cry and ducked as he swung his blade at her head, missing by an inch. The Adept swiftly drove her staff into his left knee, causing him to lose his balance and scream in pain, dropping his sword. Sheba rose and performed a spinning move that struck him across the face, sending him to the ground.

Now sure of her advantage, Sheba rose and charged forward, but did not anticipate his next move, a spinning sweeping kick that took out her legs beneath her, sending her crashing to the ground. She lay there for a moment, dazed, and the man seized his opportunity, delivering a debilitating kick to her stomach. Pain radiated through her body, and Sheba gasped for air, desperately trying to regain her concentration through her pain as the man unsheathed a small knife and lunged.

"Haze..."

There was a flash of purple light as one of many elemental Djinn appeared out of thin air, glowing purple, and the Lunpa soldier's eyes widened in shock as she disappeared from view, his knife hitting nothing but the ground. It was then, in that moment, that Sheba was able to see his eyes up close. Images of her vision returned to her, but she pushed aside her shock as she materialized once more to rise up and deliver a powerful punch to his face, sending him staggering back.

"Bolt!"

Electrical bolts struck the screaming soldier before he fell to the ground again, unconscious at last. With time to rest at

last, Sheba exhaled a held breath, trying to calm herself as she realized just how close to death she had come.

The agonized scream of a Valean stabbed by a brigand reminded her of where she was, and Sheba stood up immediately, summoning her staff to her hands as she prepared to leap into the fray once again.

"Douse."

Glowing orbs of water seemed to descend from the heavens themselves as they struck a flung torch that the light, cold rain could not extinguish. A harmless stick struck the roof of a Vale home, its intended purpose left unfulfilled.

With a curse, the thief responsible for the attempted burning turned to see Piers standing a few feet away from him, golden eyes famed for their perpetual calm and wisdom now shining with the fury of a tempest. The black-eyed Lunpan brandished his blade and ran forward with a grin of pure bloodlust. As he performed a slashing movement toward the man's neck, but Piers ducked and slashed him across the stomach with his own weapon, using the thief's momentum and a firm grip on the sword's hilt to cause the damage. In a quick and fluid movement, he slashed his leg as well. The thief let out a hiss of anger and pain before falling; he was badly wounded, but the cuts were not deep enough to kill.

"G-Get him! Get him, damn it!"

Piers turned in time to see a duo of thieves running toward him, now only inches away. He parried the slash of one, but he had been caught off guard by the sudden attack and was badly cut across the shoulder by the second. The first thief then leapt forward and landed a punch to Piers' jaw with his free hand. Staggering from the blow, Piers' body glowed

blue as he verbally commanded the power of a simple spell to buy himself some time, "*Ice!*" Icicles rained down upon the two thieves, and their yells of pain and frustration followed.

Piers winced at the pain still present in his shoulder and placed a hand over the wound, whispering, "*Ply.*" The cut closed and the bleeding was stopped, but the ache and mark of such a wound would remain for a short while after.

Piers raised his sword and cast his glare at the two that had arrived. "My turn... *Deluge!*"

At once, gigantic spheres of glowing water rained down and smashed themselves into the three Lunpa thieves, sending them flying backwards with the force of the many collisions. Two crashed into the unforgiving ground and lay there, unconscious. The third was not as lucky. His head collided with the ground in such a way that his neck was now broken. A trickle of blood ran down his mouth and his black eyes were wide open.

Without a thought, Piers rushed to the thief with the intention of healing the injury to the best of his ability, but it was too late. He could no longer sense life flowing from the dead man. Piers exhaled a held breath, feelings of guilt washing over him. This was not the first time he had taken another's life, let alone the life of a man willing to hurt those Piers held dear, but death was never something he could brush aside quickly.

He was about to turn away when he saw something happening to the dead man. It seemed like his wide open eyes were beginning to change color. Or rather, the blackness was beginning to fade away to reveal the man's natural brown eyes. Accusingly they seemed to glare up at

Piers, who watched with a stoic expression on his face, trying not to show the slightest sign of fear which was slowly welling up inside of him at the sight of something that was so... unnatural.

It was then that Piers heard what sounded like a Psynesergetic spell being cast, and as he whirled around with his sword raised, he was met with the sight of one of the downed thieves beginning to move.

The Lunpan seemed to sit up and then stand, but his movement was akin to that of a puppet, his limbs and head hanging down uselessly as his body seemed to rise of its own accord. Then he began to levitate several feet from the ground, clearly aided by Psynesergetic that Piers knew he did not possess, before opening his blank eyes and looking down upon his golden-eyed audience with no emotion on his face. His mouth opened and he began to speak in a voice Piers instantly knew was not his own.

"Listen well, Lemurian."

To a third party observer, Piers would seem to be unaffected by this alien sight. But Piers' thoughts were racing, particularly around the subject of the voice which was strangely... familiar.

"Listen, or face the untimely end of your beloved home..."

"W-what are you talking about?" Piers said in response, keeping his voice as composed as possible despite his growing fear.

"As you well know, Lemuria already stands on the brink of ruin, and unless you obey the commands I am about to give you, the blood of those you hold dear will cover every inch

of the Lemurian city. Know that you too will look upon this sight before I kill you should you refuse to cooperate."

Piers did not answer as he continued to try and attach the voice to a familiar face. It seemed so long ago that he had heard it, but still it was as though hearing it had triggered some kind of a reaction in his head. He looked up and watched the levitating man for a second before the answer made itself known to him, brought about by the memory of a certain Adept he had only met a few times, one who Jenna had once told him was capable of a hovering ability much like this one through his usage of Psynergy.

Piers clenched his fists on the hilt of his sword and gave the man a smile that could only signify dislike, "As honored as I am that you decided to seek me out specifically, I must ask you to stop hiding behind this man... Alex."

"*What... what did you call me?*" There was an unmistakable quiver in the voice now, an unevenness in the speaker's tone so subtle many people would probably have missed it, but Piers heard it clearly.

"I called you Alex. Your voice is admittedly only vaguely familiar to me, but I know of your ability to use this hovering Psynergy. Putting them together, along with the air of someone trying to enact some kind of idiotic plan of dividing and conquering those who would stand against them, as well as an attack on the site where your dreams died does not leave very many other candidates besides you."

"*You are mistaken. Never refer to me by that disgusting name again.*" The voice was that of a man clearly enraged, but desperately trying to remain composed.

Piers' smirked, pure distaste filling his eyes and voice. "Even if it was not you, the fact that you are so clearly incensed by

it gives me ample reason to refer to you in such a way. Now how about you stop hiding yourself from me?"

The voice spoke again, still clearly angered, but far less unstable. *"Your arrogance is not unexpected, being part of the thoughtless, yet unfortunately self-sustaining populace of glorified primates that walk upon the impartial land of Weyard."*

"Charming. I once believed time changes everyone, Alex, but it would seem years in hiding after a most deserved failure to live out a foolish dream, and what was no doubt a good beating have done nothing to shape your humility. You should have stayed where the Wise One left you, hidden among the dirt and the worms, right where you belong."

"Impressively verbose, Lemurian. Were I that fool, I believe I would be quite incensed. As things stand, however, I am quite content to hear you insult him. Had we the time, I would listen to more, but time is a precious thing, and not something I will waste on you."

"Go on, then," Piers answered, holding his stance as if expecting some kind of sudden violent maneuver. "Time is precious to us all."

"I will tell you this only once.. In time, an old friend of yours will return to you, and he will be carrying an artifact which you will personally present to me. You will know what I want when you see it. Bring it to me by any means necessary, and I will spare you. If you do not, then the blood of your people is entirely on your hands."

"Your threats do not frighten me. Someone who chooses to hide behind another and attempts to scare his enemies into compliance with a bit of Psynergy is not someone who can do all that you claim and is certainly not someone who can

intimidate me. If you wish for me to be frightened, then I repeat, show yourself, and give me a reason to be."

"Your bravery speaks well of you, Lemurian. However, if you think this meager display of power is somehow unconnected to the destruction all around you, within the borders of this town and across all of Weyard, then it would appear that your intelligence unfortunately can not also be a quality worth praising. Allow me to make this simple and clear. I have plunged this village into a disaster in mere minutes with but a fraction of my power, and I will unleash my power tenfold upon Lemuria if you do not cooperate with my demands. You have been warned. Do not test my patience."

The voice finally stopped, and the man seemed to awaken from the control place upon him before throwing his head back to scream in agony without warning as what appeared to be black Psynesergetic fire with a reddish glow began to envelop his body. Piers' eyes widened in shock as he watched the torturous display for at least thirty seconds before the body was released and fell to the ground, utterly lifeless.

Felix sliced a bandit in the process of attacking an old couple in his back, yelling to the villagers to start running north once again as the wounded Lunpan fell, screaming in pain. The Venus Adept clashed swords with another attacker and held the position, pressing forward with his left foot before shifting his weight to his right, allowing the thief to stumble forward. Felix drove his knee into the man's stomach before spinning and driving the hilt of his sword into the back of the Lunpan's head.

As he looked back to the couple watching in fear, he yelled out to them again. "What are you waiting for? Hurry and

go!"

"B-But, they're coming from that direction," the woman called back fearfully, holding up her husband who had suffered a kick to his stomach.

"Don't worry, I can sense them. They are all moving to the south to attack the rest of the village. Nothing will stop you from getting into the caves now. Please, you must hurry while you still can! Go!" Needing no other command, the two Valeans at last made for the safety that the north promised.

Hearing multiple screams behind him, Felix turned to see another villager, a man in a group of four, three of them children, trip and fall to the ground as a Lunpa soldier charged him. The man screamed for his children to run before the sword of his killer brought his screams to an end with a slice through his neck. A simultaneous mix of rage and guilt blurred Felix's mind as he raised a palm and uttered, low and focused, "*Clay Spire...*"

Stone-like formations crashed upon the soldier and brought him to his knees with a pained grunt. Felix charged the downed soldier this time, resisting the urge to deal the same fate he had granted the innocent man, and once again brought his hilt smashing into the back of the man's head. The Venus Adept looked down at the unconscious man for a moment before turning away to leave.

"What are you doing?!" Felix turned in surprise to see a teenaged Valean boy no older than sixteen come out of hiding from inside a besieged house alongside his younger sister and brother, pointing and screaming at the soldier. "Kill him! Why aren't you killing him? Like he did to my dad!"

Felix did not answer, inwardly feeling shaken at the hatred in the boy's voice and eyes. The boy's face was familiar and had not changed too much from when Felix had last seen him, when he was ten years old and had been happily playing with his friends, chasing the little dogs that went running through the town which had still been undergoing reconstruction at the time, just months before the war had begun. Jarring was too light a word to describe the difference between the smiling boy and the rage-filled teenager; horrifying would probably be the word Felix would have chosen.

"Just go," he yelled out to the boy. "Hurry and run to the caves. You're in danger here."

"Don't give me that! You *saw* what he did to my dad, didn't you?! He deserves it!"

Felix looked down at the man again. Perhaps he did deserve it, but then again, perhaps he did not. Whether truly a murderer or an innocent man, Felix knew that that which cursed him rendered such questions irrelevant, and it was not his place to administer such justice.

"Fine! I'll do it... you stupid coward..." The boy eyed the soldier's sword, purpose filling his eyes.

"I told you to go," Felix responded and fixed the boy with a cold look to hopefully frighten him into obeying, watching as the boy glared back and his siblings shrank back from the look on Felix's face. "You don't want them to see something like this. I know you don't. Just go."

The boy turned around to look at his sister and brother, both of whom were crying, looking at him with tear-stained eyes. The rage on his face dissipated for a second, leaving a look of compassion and worry before they too were gone, leaving

only a mask of stoic determination. "Let's go," the boy finally replied before turning around and sending a scathing look in Felix's direction. "How many times are you going to come back and bring something horrible with you?! Nobody wants you here! Just go away and never come back!"

Felix said nothing as he watched the children, now the only surviving members of their family, move north towards the caverns as fast as they could, never looking back. Behind him, a sneaking thief grinned at his opportunity and started to run towards him, the point of his sword aimed directly at Felix's back.

"Searing Beam!"

A flash of orange illuminated the area behind him, and a scream was heard along with an explosive blast, and he turned to see the attacker fall to the ground, down and out. Felix looked to the right to see the origin of the powerful blast of Psynergy, and could not help but feel something resembling pride to see Jenna on her feet, sword in hand. She looked as though it had only been days since their journey across Weyard had ended, and was not in the least bit hindered by the sickness still present within her.

"Watch your back," Jenna called as she made her way towards her brother, motioning to the fallen Lunpan soldier. "He was coming up behind you."

"I knew," Felix said softly in response, cocking his head to the south, in the direction of the area that had become the plaza of the new Vale. The two siblings could see flashes of purple and blue, indicating that half of their quartet had already made it to the area. "Let's go. A lot of people gathered over there when Lunpa made its way through the north gate. We need to redirect them back to the caves."

"Felix!"

He ceased his mental preparation to run to the plaza and looked back at Jenna.

"I know you're going to say this isn't the time, but I don't care," Jenna said, clearly resolute in her desire to say what was on her mind. "Because I don't know if I'm going to get another chance. I'll be quick. Felix... he was wrong. He was just angry. Vale needs you back, your friends want you back, and your sister wants you back. And yes, I *do* need to tell you this because I could tell how much he hurt you. But more than that, I know you, Felix. I know that you think you can't ever come back, but you can. You just don't want to believe that."

Felix was silent as he listened and took in her words.

"So don't you dare walk out on me again. Ever. I swear I will chase you and kick your ass if you ever do it again. Even if everybody else in this stupid damn world wanted you gone, I want you here. And if you can honestly say that that won't keep you here... that it doesn't mean anything to you... then my brother really is dead, just like I thought he was every damn day for the last four years." She raised a hand to her eyes, refusing to let her tears run freely. "I can't take another funeral, Felix. I can't and I won't." Silence passed for two seconds before Jenna nodded her head in the same direction Felix had indicated. "Now let's go."

The two siblings began their sprint towards the brewing hell in what was left of their hometown. Not another word was spoken. Not another word needed to be spoken.

"It is him." The dark blue man turned to face his companion to his right, the man in black, looking almost camouflaged

with the night as he spoke again. "Tune your senses. He is approaching."

"It is true," Alex agreed, looking around as if he were surveying a vast wasteland despite being surrounded only by trees. "But he is quite adept at masking his presence to some degree, no doubt intentional to keep us blind from where he will choose to intervene. Of course, it does not matter. We need not expend any more energy than we need to in forming our own intervention. Once he makes his move, we will be able to catch him off guard."

"If he even makes his move, you mean," Gareth remarked, bitterness seeping from every word. "Can't you sense it? Those Lunpa forces that were supposedly 'improved' by the curse are getting carved up down there. Even without Felix's help, they would be perfectly capable of turning the tide against these idiots." He walked forward to move closer to the leader of the group, speaking in his direction. "Believe me, I know their fighting. No amount of 'dark power' or reawakening of some primal instinct is going to make the thieves any more capable of subduing our targets."

"Much as it pains me to say it, Gareth is quite right," Alex chimed in with a smirk. "The few soldiers that there are could potentially pose a threat, given that they actually bothered to train themselves properly, but they are vastly outnumbered by the brutes that were solely employed to push and shove the Lunpa populace about while being paid in filth, drink, and the company of unwilling women. They are not warriors; I would barely deem them worthy of the title of 'human'."

"Are the two of you asking something of me? Or are you simply attempting to anger me by mocking my abilities?" Silence met the words of the blue man, and he simply

turned around, allowing his gaze to travel right past Gareth and Alex, both of whom turned as well to follow his gaze. There sat the Monster of Lunpa, standing ready but not moving until commanded, the only signs of life being its breathing and occasional blinking.

"Tell me, why else would I not have just beheaded this thing and left its head in the center of Lunpa as a message to all who oppose our order? I admit, this was not part of my original plan, but it was always a possibility that this creature's abilities would be useful to our cause." The blue man turned to his right again and nodded, a nonverbal command to his closest companion. The man in black showed no signs of movement, staring straight ahead as Toadonpa began to trudge forward in the direction of the town, its actions dictated by its new master.

Unseen to all, Feizhi watched the man in black with a worried look. In her mind, she struggled to understand the motivations of this strange figure, one second acting against their leader, the next following his every whim, her thoughts reaching only a wall of uncertainty and confusion. *Every event is veiled now. I am sorry, warriors of Vale, that I can do no more except hope. Please... be safe, and survive this trial.*

Garet remained silent as he watched, ignoring and pushing away every urge he had to yell in opposition. *This was you, Isaac. You did this... and you will answer for it.*

Alex watched with his usual stoic expression, inwardly simultaneously praising and chastising Felix for his choice to turn against the order he had sold his soul to. *For what it is worth, Felix... you always were the only one of your little octet of fools that I could proudly call a worthy companion of mine. A pity that this should be your end...*

"Stone Spire!"

"Supercool!"

"Dragon Fume!"

"Spark Plasma!"

Flashes of yellow, red, purple and blue light illuminated what was left of the settlement of Vale and made five silhouettes visible in the night. The screams of Psynesergetic attacks filled the air, the lights of Psynesergetic spells following the commands of their respective casters. Bodies of Lunpa men littered the ground, many of them still moving but in too much pain to continue their assault.

The attacks came to a stop as those from Lunpa who had not yet fallen suddenly ceased their relentless charge towards their superior opponents and began to back away in an eerie unison, slowly disappearing into the blackness of the night, leaving their companions behind.

Alone in the center of the plaza now, the four Adepts observed their surroundings with their backs to each other, each trying to keep calm after their exhausting fight and expending of much energy. Though agitated, within themselves they felt a certain calmness that none of them had felt for years. With the return of just one to the fold, half of their group was reunited, fighting as one just as they had during that fateful journey.

The calm was shattered as an animalistic roar struck fear into each of them, right to their very cores. All four faced the direction of the sound, preparing themselves, and saw a beast charging towards them right out of the night, as if summoned from some dark, wicked plane and sent into their

cherished world that had a beauty amidst so much tragedy that was still worth defending, even from a monster such as this.

The Adepts cast the same four spells as before, the strongest they could muster, and each struck the beast, knocking it off balance for a second or two. But almost immediately, it righted itself and opened its jaws to unleash another enraged roar before it suddenly leapt forward and seemed to slide along the ground at an incredible speed right towards its prey, breaking right through the quartet and sending them all flying backwards to the ground.

Jenna struggled to her feet and instinctively raised her Phaeton's Blade towards the monster just a few feet away. "*Heat Wave...*" she whispered, feeling a warmth surrounding her.

A bright orange plume of fire burst from her very being towards Toadonpa, but the creature immediately opened its jaws wide and a cloud of black fire, a perversion of the Dark Blessing, seemed to explode from within itself, striking the Psynenergetic spell and pushing it back towards its caster. Jenna released her spell and dove to the side to avoid the monster's attack, which struck the ground with a small explosion.

As Toadonpa turned its naturally grinning face to focus its attention on Jenna, Piers quickly struck next as its attention was focused on her. "*Freeze Prism!*"

At once, gigantic icebergs seemed to rain down on Toadonpa, shattering on impact, and knocking it to the side. Righting its large frame, Toadonpa wasted no time in sending another Dark Blessing towards Piers, and the Lemurian answered back with a Djinni summon. "*Shade!*"

With a flash of blue light, a glowing watery shield was projected around him, halting the attack, but only temporarily as the shields gave way seconds later.

Piers screamed as the fire made contact with his body, the sheer force knocking him backwards. Piers tried to steady himself, doubled over and trying to ignore the pain fluttering over every inch of his skin. He heard and felt a crash right before him, undoubtedly the result of a great leap from the monster, and looked up just in time to see one of Toadonpa's claws lash out and leave three large scratches across his torso.

Piers felt the warm blood running down his chest and stomach, dropping his sword and placing his hands over his chest, instinctively trying to heal himself. He was barely able to scream from the sheer shock of the brutal attack. The monster whirled around, swiftly striking Piers with its tail before his work was done, and the wounded Piers was again sent to the ground, his head striking the earth, knocking him out.

Saliva dripped from the monster's jaws as it eyed Piers' fallen body hungrily, but it paid the price for a lack of attention once more as the Psynesergetic representations of a fireball, lightning bolts, and a gigantic sword struck it simultaneously, prompting a roar of pain as it was violently pushed to the ground on its side by the attacks.

Jenna ran towards Piers and knelt beside him, holding both her hands above him before whispering, "*Cool Aura.*" A soft red glow of healing energy emanated from her hands and flowed into her fallen friend, but the sound of another roar informed her of her lack of time, and she pulled away from the still-unconscious Piers as soon as the cuts had been closed, leaving painful looking scars.

Sheba and Felix both jumped out of the way of a leaping crouch from Toadonpa, both feeling the ground shake from such a close impact. Sheba turned around to face Toadonpa once more and just barely dodged a claw, but Toadonpa swung its tail at her in the same motion as its body turned from the missed swipe. The impact was less than it could have been, only sending Sheba stumbling from the strike, and she immediately recovered to take aim with her staff.

"*Tornado!*" Fierce cyclones took shape around Toadonpa, and the monster let out roars of pain as they tore at its flesh, but the force of the wind proved ineffective against its massive size, failing to knock it over. With a mighty leap, Toadonpa tore right through the constructs of powerful wind and began to charge at a shocked Sheba.

Sheba felt her breath escape her throat as she felt arms encircle her waist and bring her to the ground in a running jump, just barely getting her out of the way of the charging creature. Toadonpa hissed in frustration at its missed target, and was distracted from her yet again as Felix leapt forward with a scream of, "*Echo!*", and struck its body with his sword, another blast of earthen energy striking it immediately after as a yellow image of a Venus Djinni surrounded Felix, granting him power.

Breathing heavily, Sheba turned her head to see Jenna beginning to pick herself up from the ground, and felt a surge of gratitude towards her best friend. She was about to voice a sentiment of thanks, but was silenced by the harsh look Jenna suddenly gave her as she looked in her direction. It was quick, fleeting, but it resonated nonetheless.

"Get up," Jenna said fiercely. "And watch yourself. I can't be looking after you all the time!" With that, Jenna ran forward to enter the fray once more.

Felix swung his Gaia Blade to make contact with one of Toadonpa's claws as it came flying in his direction, successfully slicing it and causing the monster to stumble backwards in pain as it clutched its wounded claw. Turning to see his sister approaching, Felix yelled out to her. "Jenna, get ready! *Meld!*"

As she ran forward as well, Sheba watched with an almost prideful feeling building up inside as the two previously estranged siblings were surrounded by a golden light of energy as they leapt forward and simultaneously struck the beast head on. Seeing her chance, Sheba concentrated and called forth her own summon. "*Blitz!*" Toadonpa was then struck with a staff crackling with purple electricity, staggering and howling with pain.

But the brief sense of victory was short lived as Toadonpa immediately seemed to recover and glare down at Sheba, opening its jaws to unleash another Dark Blessing. Sheba tried to prepare a Psynesergetic spell to fight back, but her mind was then clouded with the pain of the burning blackness. Through the pained haze, Sheba could only think of how the pain she was now experiencing must have been what Piers had felt before a mighty claw sent her flying and crashing to the ground, and all was black.

Hearing a cry of simultaneous anger and worry, Toadonpa turned its head towards the sound, its natural instinct—what remained of it—enticing it to ignore the fallen ones and focus on the last two hostile creatures that would soon just be part of its evening meal. Calling upon a surge of energy, Toadonpa took a mighty leap towards Jenna and Felix, and though they moved aside in time, a black surge of energy that was once purple in color burst from its body, the shockwave sending the two to the ground, separated from each other once more.

Felix struggled to his feet, instinctively raising his sword. His eyes widened as he saw the creature was starting towards Jenna, who was also attempting to get up from the last attack. Were he granted the luxury of calm reflective thought in the moment, Felix would have wondered when last he had been forced to run as fast as he was now, but his mind was a blur, the only semi-coherent thought in his head of getting his sister out of harm's way.

His mind began to clear as he pushed Jenna out of the way of another strike, but it clouded once more when the same slashing movement struck his blade and sent it flying to the side. Felix opened his mouth to call out a Psynergy spell, but all that came out of his mouth was a strangled gasp as his ears discerned the sound of Jenna's horrified scream, and his eyes just barely saw the other hand of Toadonpa shoot towards him in a stabbing motion before everything seemed to go cloudy. Looking down slowly and in shock, Felix's vision slowly cleared and he took in the sight of a monstrous claw right before him, two curved and disgusting nails now wet with blood as they impaled his stomach.

Toadonpa pulled its hand back allowing Felix's blood to issue forth from his wound and splash upon the ground before raising one of its feet to kick him away, the ferocity of the blow sending the Venus Adept flying backwards and crashing right through the wall of one of the houses that had surrounded the plaza. Jaws opened wide, and with another powerful torrent of black fire, the house was reduced to a pile of debris.

Jenna heard her sword fall to the ground, never quite realizing when she had let it go. Her body told her to stand, but her blank mind caused her to fall to her knees, her eyes on the destroyed remains of the house now burying her brother. In a daze, she looked about the battlefield, the once

quiet and peaceful plaza of her home, and looked upon the motionless bodies of Sheba and Piers.

In a brief moment of clarity following her initial shock, she tried to make sense of what she was seeing. She felt like screaming out of how little sense it all made, how unjustifiably cruel it all was. How everything—all they had done, all the battles they had fought together, all the happy moments, all the promises and hopes shared between the four that the war that had torn the world asunder was only a passing storm that would soon die down as all storms did... and most recently, all the hopes she had held that Felix would never leave her side again—could be rendered so meaningless so easily.

Jenna then became aware of a growing shadow, and turned her head to see Toadonpa slowly walking towards her. Its eyes glared at her and its drooling mouth and curved fangs opened wide to unleash a Dark Blessing aimed directly at her. With a roar came the cloud of blackness...

Jenna did not resist.

All was hopeless.

"It is over," the man in black spoke softly. "The Alchemist's allies are defeated."

"So soon," Alex murmured, a statement to himself rather than a reply. "Perhaps I did underestimate the curse."

"As many do before they are consumed by it," the man in blue replied. There was an unmistakable tone of frostiness in his voice. "What a tragedy for us all. Such youth and power, wasted."

"They are not dead," Gareth said, trying to control his heavy breathing, sensing the faint energies of the fallen. "Not yet. Call that creature off now. We still need them."

"I am restraining the ferocity of the creature," the man in black spoke, sounding as though he were voicing a contemplative thought to himself. He finally moved, casting a look in the direction of the man in blue. "Shall I have it return to us?"

"No," the man in blue responded, turning to face Gareth. "I'm afraid we no longer have any 'need' of them. Alive, anyway. Not with the Alchemist so close. In addition, you were right about one thing, Gareth. Their combined strength is something to behold. Even the monster was staggered more than a few times, and the rest of our forces were being eliminated quickly. As such, they are a very great threat. And all threats, as you know, are to be eliminated." Turning to his companion in black, he spoke in an audible whisper. "Allow the beast to consume them."

"No!" Gareth cried out, drawing multiple gazes in his direction. He calmed himself and tried to speak rationally. "You can't do that. You said they would be spared, and that they would be used to draw Isaac in and then it would be over. You can't just... alter the agreement!"

"Agreement?" The blue man's voice was tinged with dark amusement. "You wound me, Gareth. Are you insinuating that you set terms with me that I would then be bound to by my honor? Tell me, when did this imaginary meeting take place? If such an event occurred, I'd love to hear about it."

"But... you..."

"Because as far as I can remember, not once have you ever spoken up about how you wished your former companions to

be treated."

"You... you said to us..."

"I repeated the deal that I made with Felix. He was the one who made me promise not to force him to endure the deaths of those he loved, a promise I was more than happy to keep to until he decided to walk the path of the betrayer, and naturally, agreements with traitors are null and void. You are not also planning to walk that path, are you, my friend?"

"No, I..." Gareth clenched his fists painfully tightly and his entire body shook with rage. "Just... look, whether or not it was an agreement with Felix specifically, you said to us all that they would not be harmed. You gave your word to us all in that moment!"

"You are grasping for a case now, dear friend." A cold smile began to appear on the blue man's face, though his voice held no amusement any longer. "You will be now be silent and question my orders no longer."

"You're breaking the deal!" Gareth yelled, and in a flash, his Fire Brand was unsheathed and raised, the tip pointed at the blue man's throat. All around him was movement as everyone turned to face him. The man in black watched in silence, Alex had an apprehensive look on his face, Feizhi looked fearful, and the man in blue simply continued to smile with an almost knowing air. "You can't kill them like this! I won't let you!"

"So you have chosen betrayal as the rational course of action," the blue man said. "How... utterly unfortunate. Valeans are so... untrustworthy, it seems."

"Call off the monster," Gareth spoke, each word given emphasis and dripping with strong dislike of the man they

were directed at. "Right now. All I ask is for them to live and to be set free when we have Isaac. I am not leaving this group or betraying you. All I want is this one simple thing."

"Alex."

At once, Alex's eyes flashed and a blast of Psynergy sent Gareth flying backwards with a yell of anger and pain as he hit the ground. Before Gareth could pick himself up, a flash of blue light told him Alex had teleported near to him and he felt a hand grasp his shoulder.

"Consider your request denied, old friend." With a final yell of rage and opposition, Gareth disappeared with a burst of light along with Alex.

Feizhi, watching the commotion helplessly, winced from the sudden bright display in the dark night, colors dancing in her blinking eyes. She turned to see the blue man looking directly at her, his face unreadable.

"Four companions lost in a matter of days," he said, beginning to take a few steps forward. "That our order is failing so rapidly is most unfortunate... and curious. Do you not agree?"

"I do," she responded softly, beginning to feel the cold hand of fright grip her as he neared. Her fingers twitched as she instinctively regarded her concealed blades, ready to use them if necessary. "It is very curious."

"Indeed. Curious that it should occur when the Alchemist is just about to make his move and right when we spring our trap. Such things take planning, secrecy, the right words, and working in the shadows with likeminded and similarly misguided souls."

The blue man began to encircle Feizhi, speaking calmly as he paced in a slow, deliberate circle. "And while the only person I can truly trust in this world has given you his very rare vote of confidence, I must admit that this string of betrayals has had me wondering where your loyalties truly lie. And that even if they do lie with our cause, whether they will change at the moment we encounter your dear friend once again. She and you were always very close, were you not? Not so different from Gareth and his Valean friends."

"My loyalties lie only with the darkness," Feizhi responded, her hands shaking. "Of that, you can be certain."

"That is quite untrue. I cannot be certain of anything, as this night has proven. The free will of humans is such an... obstacle. As such, it is with great sorrow that I must do this. *Shadow Bolt.*"

At his calmly spoken words, a crackling bolt of black lightning fired forth from his form, catching Feizhi off-guard. She could not even sense the attack before the bolts surged through her now uncontrollably shaking body, crackling and sparking all over. Her knees buckled and she fell to the ground, writhing and crying out. Then it was over, and Feizhi's body continued to shake from the pain as she gasped and whimpered, her arms crossed as she grabbed hold of them with both her hands, as if hoping it would ebb the pain away.

She looked up to see the man in blue looking down at her, the beginnings of a smile on his face. The man in black watched in silence, unreadable as always.

"As I have stated to you before, as someone who was granted your abilities through the influence of the Psynergy stones six years ago, you stand to be affected by Dark

Alchemy once the light of Jupiter is enshrouded. As such, I humbly ask that you consider this merely an act of bringing about an inevitable result more quickly than originally anticipated. You understand, of course."

"Please... do not..."

"Dark Curse."

Feizhi's final thoughts were of Hama's smiling face, a beautiful and perfect image in her mind that was very soon lost amid swirling and boundless blackness.

The blue man looked down upon Feizhi's motionless form, the corners of his lips rising as she began to rise after a few moments of silence. Black eyes opened, and the new slave to darkness was greeted by an overjoyed whisper. "Welcome to our order. I look forward to working alongside you."

The almost mocking smile faded suddenly as a bright light seemed to flood the world for a second, bathing all in brightness, prompting his partner to speak.

"He is here."

Like a small sun, a large glowing sphere of orange fire gave light to every shadowed corner of the land on this night. Materializing from seemingly nowhere, blackened eyes, once a glowing red, looked upon it with confusion. A soft, animalistic growl was heard as instinct gave way to sensations of danger. A whisper heard only by the speaker was uttered among the rumbling sound of sheer power being brought into existence.

"Megiddo..."

All was bright.

"Yet always, hope endures..." -Gandalf, from that Return of the King game that nobody remembers.

Disclaimer: Yep.

Many thanks to reviewer "anon". Words cannot adequately describe how grateful I am that someone finds something to enjoy in my work. Don't know if you're reading this, but thanks all the same. One day, I plan to thank a reviewer in an update that doesn't come a year after the comment.
Edit 8/21/2014: Thanks again to anon for catching my error in the Sheba and Piers scene. Don't know how I kept missing that, but I despise when I do, so thank you.

So yeah, this chapter will either be really easy or really tough to read. On the one hand, it was packed with fight scenes and destruction. On the other, it was packed with fight scenes and destruction. Either way, my apologies(1). To counterbalance that, I tried to give each character some special moment to make each scene unique. Sheba made good use of her prophecy and got to be an awesome one-woman army, Felix's demons were calmed by Jenna's verbal dropkick, and Piers spoke with and even managed to vex the grand architect himself. Here's hoping I succeeded.

Shocking(2) plot developments next time! This next chapter will definitely not take as long a time to get done (not that anybody's shaking with anticipation) as a lot of ideas finally came back to me after a long dark period of inactivity. This is ClairvoyantMoonchild, still regretting this story's stupid title but too lazy to change it, signing off.

(1) Further apologies if these silly little self-analyses at the end of my chapters make me seem like more of a pretentious

jerk than I really am. This is just how I amuse myself, and hopefully someone else out there who doesn't mind "witty" commentary. I suppose it's easy enough to just skip these anyway.

(2) Provided you've never, ever, ever been exposed to the myriad forms of media which contain convoluted world domination plots involving a "darkness" element... aw, damn it.

***Chapter 5*: Chapter 5**

The Wrath of Dark Alchemy.

Revelation: The Eye of the Storm

Darkness. Light.

Their struggle has been a constant since time immemorial. Ominous rain clouds seek to cover the sun, the light of which always finds a way to pierce the barrier. Day and night are engaged in a neverending contest to decide whether the world should be illuminated or shrouded. Dark shadows seek to remind man and beast that even in light, darkness will always exist, and the utilization of fire by man and greater sight by beast demonstrate the resilience of light and knowledge against darkness and the isolation it brings, however unintentionally, to the minds of all creatures. Even the dark reaches of space are illuminated by countless innumerable stars, soldiers of light seeking to part the eternity of blackness, a task that can never be completed, for the void is too deep to truly penetrate.

Yet neither is good, and neither is evil, in much the same way that a predatory animal and its prey are both neither good nor evil. Such concepts belong only to humankind, creatures whose mere existence is but a second in time compared to the eternity of the two great opposing forces. For in the end, the usage of either force for good or ill comes only from the man who uses them to further his own ends.

So it is that the physical embodiments of darkness and light have come into conflict at last, seeking to bring an end to a struggle that is perhaps an alien concept to them, for their thoughts, motivations, pleasures, vices, and aspirations take

precedence over eternity itself. Such is the nature of beings who realize that they will one day cease to exist.

Some believe the darkness will be illuminated. Some believe the light will fade into the void.

Far fewer believe that either case involves an inevitable and inescapable melding of forces.

The storm still rages.

Screams. Irregular flashes of blood upon the ground punctuating the most frequent sights of a familiar city in flames. Animalistic roars and hisses. Black fire enveloping the land.

Lavender eyes opened, temporarily ending a period of deep meditation. Ivan brushed golden locks from his eyes and stared straight ahead at a wall of pure stone, his piercing gaze similarly unchanging and impassable. Much like the walls of these drainage tunnels of Kalay, Ivan had created many barriers unseen by the naked eye in this period of seclusion that hid the core of his soul and served to protect what he believed to be the simultaneously strongest and weakest part of the human being... the mind. His mind.

Additionally, they served to mask his true feelings on the current state of the world around him deep inside. Barring himself from expressing emotions like worry, sadness, and fear helped to give him focus, further broadening the reach of his mind as he sought to discern the shape and true motivations of this bizarre and ancient shroud that had cast its shadow over the land in seemingly so little time.

For now, the Jupiter Adept had dedicated himself to the task of eradicating the influence of Lunpa throughout Kalay as a

starting point of combating the shroud. It had been a long struggle, spanning the past two years, of attempting to reach his old friend, the fallen lord of Kalay. Ivan had attempted to convince Hammet many times of the necessity to seek out allies and rally who remained of the city's peoples to fight back against those who had now taken it for themselves.

Always the responses were the same. The city was too far gone to save, and any potential allies were being bled dry and stretched thin by the expanse of Lunpa and their own allies like Bilibin. Ivan had, of course, considered his own allies as well, whose powers could possibly make a difference, but always there was something impeding any of his plans in seeking their help, from the barricades and watch-points set up by Lunpa and Bilibin all the way to Vale's corner of Angara, to the pure and simple fact that their group had been scattered and isolated as well by this ongoing war, and that Vale itself was not without the need for protection through the years.

But Ivan was not without hope. He had never been one to give up in the face of any odds, insurmountable though they seemed. The world itself had been brought back from the brink of destruction by the deeds of him and his friends, after all, and Ivan had long believed that if something so fantastic and seemingly impossible could be accomplished, this new storm could also be weathered. Thinking once more to that day, when the Mars Lighthouse cast its light upon him, Ivan shut his eyes once more and continued to wait. Moments later, the silence was broken.

"Ivan?" A soft voice amidst the sound of running water, full of worry and a hidden sadness, broke right through the unseen walls like they were made of nothing but parchment.

Ivan cast aside his concentration at once and stood up, ready to greet his sister.

"I'm here," Ivan responded, as Hama rounded the corner to see him. Ivan resisted the urge to embrace her, having grown accustomed to the very short visits his sister had paid him through the past years, consumed as she was by her pact with the darkness she sought to destroy. In her own words, she could only allow herself to see him briefly, lest she be compelled to abandon her duties and in anyway put him in danger.

"You have it?"

Ivan looked down at the spot besides where he had been sitting, noting a lone Mythrill bag beside his Dracomace, inside of which pulsed the dark star of Jupiter. Even now, Ivan could feel its energies almost calling out to him, appealing to him as if trying to hypnotize him. It was a strange and almost frightening pull.

Hama nodded at his nonverbal action before striding over to him and embracing him tightly. Ivan was surprised at first by the action, but reciprocated immediately, knowing at once this was not a happy embrace, happy though they clearly were to see each other after a long period of time. Ivan could sense that his sister needed assurance at this moment, and so he pulled away from her embrace and held her shoulders. His eyes met hers. "What has happened, Hama?"

"They are gone," Hama spoke, her voice tight with regret. "Feizhi. Maha. Maha is dead, the damned fool. Too courageous for his own good. When I sensed him being attacked, I tried to help. It is why I arrived here late. It was so utterly foolish, I know that now. I could have jeopardized everything in doing so, but still I went back for him and tried

to track the Veiled Sentry to stop them. In the end, I had no choice but to retreat when they got too close to the Dark Alchemists. There could be no victory against all of them."

Hama expelled a breath roughly, looking away and at the stream of water running through the dungeon of Kalay. "He is dead... but Feizhi..."

"You do not think she is dead." Ivan waited for her to respond to his assured statement with baited breath.

"I do not sense her any longer. Or at least, not as I once was capable of doing. But I know she is not dead. *He* had plans for Maha... to murder him by way of purification. That is the kind of contemptible scum he truly is. But Feizhi... I have no doubt that they brought her under their curse; the curse from which there is no escape. And it was my doing. Me, brother. I told her to go and put her in harm's way. I may as well have delivered her to them myself."

"Hama," Ivan said forcefully, his grip on her shoulders tightening to gain her attention further, and Hama flinched from the pain. He softened his grip and his voice became slightly less stern. "Sister. Listen to me. You had no control over her actions, regardless of your order. We both know she would be angered to even hear of such a suggestion. Feizhi chose to go through with your mission because she is a fighter, and believed, just as you do, that everything we are doing is for the good of everyone and not just ourselves. Am I right?"

The slight and barely visible nod from Hama gave Ivan his cue to continue. Ivan released her shoulders and stepped back, his eyes still meeting her own with a stern glare. "We don't have the time or the luxury for you to be carrying guilt on your conscience on top of everything else. All this does is

give us one more motivation to put an end to this... insanity. Understood?"

Hama nodded, more visibly this time and fixed her younger brother with a look of admiration. Her guilt was not yet completely assuaged, but it was ebbing away with the passing seconds.

"Good," Ivan said. "So what is our plan?"

"First and foremost, we must keep this star from them. Unfortunately, we will have to change our original plan. You cannot keep it here for any longer, Ivan. I do not know what information the Dark Alchemist acquired from Maha, though I am quite certain it was not much, strong-willed as Maha was. But even so, Alex has informed him that my brother resides in Kalay. Now that I have betrayed him, he will undoubtedly send a wave of his forces to attack the city, with you as the primary target. It is not safe here for you, or the star."

"I see," Ivan said softly, cursing Alex's name in his mind. "Will you leave with it then?"

"It is a risk I will have to take."

"Very well. Is there more we must do?"

"We also planned to aid the Champan settlement in their coming battle against Alhafra and Lunpa."

"Champa?" Ivan asked, uncharacteristically puzzled. "I do wish to help the people of Weyard, but why them specifically?"

"The dark star of Venus rests at Izumo," Hama said. "Under the protection of Lady Uzume. We need access to the sea,

and specifically, one of Champa's new boats to ferry us in that direction. Naturally, I considered your Lemurian friend first, but that was never wise, given the suspicion we would have immediately drawn from the Dark Alchemists in going to Vale. Our original plan was to hide the star at Izumo and then reclaim it once our business on Angara was finished, but now Alhafra has gotten involved and has blockaded Champa."

"I see," Ivan responded, looking deep in thought. "And Vale is under their gaze at the moment, so seeking out Piers' help at this moment would be dangerous. So what is your plan?"

"I am going to Alpine Crossing," Hama replied as Ivan gave her a questioning look. "To request aid from Feh and his warriors. The numbers of Alhafra and Lunpa combined will be a staggering force. Not even our powers could stem them for too long. We need numbers."

"I understand the strategy. It is the part about you convincing Feh that concerns me."

Hama sighed and looked away towards the stone wall. "I know. I would be lying if I said I was not concerned. But Feizhi believed in his honor, and so I will too. I will find a way."

A silence passed over the two of them for a second before Ivan called the Mythril bag into an outstretched hand before handing it in Hama's direction. "In that case, you should hurry. Alhafra and Lunpa will not be slow about their occupation of Champa."

"Yes, you are right," Hama agreed, taking the bag from her brother before looking into his eyes gravely. "But..."

Ivan gave his sister a questioning glance. "What is it?"

"The choice is yours alone to make, and I know this was not our original plan, but I would ask that you come with me."

Ivan reached out and took Hama's free hand, giving it an affectionate squeeze. "I would, but I have my own duties to Kalay. You know that. Maha has informed me that Dodonpa is dead. No doubt this will only be a brief lack of leadership, but for now it will create a ripple throughout this beast he created. The soldiers are loyal to him, not the Dark Alchemists, and will be lost for the moment. I need to take that advantage now, before *he* no doubt brings his curse upon them."

Hama gave a small sigh, but fixed Ivan with a look of understanding. "I figured as much. Just... please be careful, brother. I believe you can handle a great number of soldiers, but... promise me that should he come to Kalay, you will not engage him." Hama grasped Ivan's shoulders. "Just flee. Please. The thought of him taking you as well is unbearable."

"I will be careful, sister," Ivan responded, fixing Hama with a stern look once more. "And I expect the same of you. Do not let your worry of me cloud your thoughts. You taught me that. I expect you to hold to it."

"You have my word," Hama nodded as she released him and gave him a smile. "When did you become the responsible sibling?"

Ivan allowed himself a smirk. "Has that ever not been the case?"

Hama was about to respond when they both felt the strange sensation that came with sensing great Psynesergetic energies. It was far off, but it felt so near. Light suddenly flooded the dark tunnels, flowing in through what had once

been the mouth of the cavern shaped to become the Kalay drainage tunnels. For a moment, both siblings felt overwhelmed by such glorious energy, and a strange... hope that it seemed to bring with its glow.

Then it was over, and darkness seemed to return, both in the cave and in their minds. "Go on," Ivan spoke, his mirth now replaced by seriousness once more. "Be quick."

Another silent nod, and the two siblings embraced once again for only a brief few seconds. Then it was over, and Ivan was soon left alone in the tunnels once more. He called his Dracomace to his hand, and started in the other direction. "I'll do my part, Isaac," he spoke softly to the darkness. "And I expect you to do the same."

Garet barely took notice of his new, yet familiar surroundings of the land outside the town of Imil as Alex's transportation came to an end. Without a second thought, he rose to his feet and swung the Fire Brand towards the Alchemist behind him in a spinning slash, the action aided by a yell of rage. The strike was immediately blocked by Alex's own blade. Their eyes met beyond their swords as they held the position, neither giving an inch and each pushing against the other. With a frustrated growl, Garet pushed forward with all his weight, finally forcing Alex back a few steps, but he immediately recovered and assumed a stance.

Garet charged forward immediately, the heat of his Psynergy melting the gathering snow at his feet upon contact so that he was not slowed at all by its presence. Over and over, he spat curses in the direction of Alex to aid his attacks, his mind and sight blurred more by rage than the freezing cold and rapidly falling snow. "...*stupid... bastard...*" A missed

slice and a near stab. "...worthless... son of a... bitch..." A parried blow, followed by a precise strike that missed its target, but drew blood nonetheless. "...kill you... I'll kill you..." A broken blocking maneuver, followed immediately by a swift and painful punch to Alex's face. The Alchemist staggered backwards, and Gareth opened his fist to aim his palm right at Alex's torso. "*Heat Wave!*"

Alex immediately raised his own hand to form around himself a glowing, watery blue shield that looked similar to the powers of the Mercury Djinni Shade that Gareth had become acquainted with during the last leg of his fateful journey. Alex let out a gasp of surprise and pain as the spell that seemed to carry Gareth's very hatred with it was only somewhat dissipated, the rest of it striking Alex dead on. With a look of utter distaste, Alex sent forth a blast of pure Psynergy back at Gareth, who prepared himself, wincing as he was sent backwards from the sheer force, but his preparation had kept him from being knocked off his feet. Gareth calmed himself enough to speak, still shaking with rage.

"You killed them... you killed Jenna, you bastard..." Gareth growled, forcing himself to hold back the tears as he thought of his friends, and especially the only innocent member of his old childhood gang of four, dying so trivially upon the land of his old home, as nothing but morsels of food for a disgusting creature. "Do you hear me? *You* did this! You killed Jenna!" Without conjuring a spell in mind, he simply sent a blast of fire in Alex's direction, who responded with a flying sphere of water which extinguished the blast.

"There was nothing you would have been able to do to stop him even if I had not intervened," Alex yelled above the din, inwardly glad that his words seemed to penetrate Gareth's haze of anger as the Mars Adept finally calmed himself by expelling a shuddering breath. "We both know this, Gareth.

Besides, I feel no guilt for my part in this. You can only blame yourself for not deciding to ally with them sooner as Felix did, blinded by your fear and insecurities."

"Fear and insecurities? Tell me, then, what if it was Mia out there, you hypocritical bastard?! What then?!"

Alex felt a chill in his blood, his eyes flickering for a second to the east where the silent town of Imil stood, a mile away and difficult to see through the snow. "That is unimportant."

"Dodging the question? How typical," Gareth retorted, taking a breath to calm his nerves again. He had learned many times before that being lost in blind rage came with consequences. With his Psynergy, he lifted the hood of his cloak over his head, finally noticing the biting wind on his face and eyes as the haze of rage died down. "So what now, Alex? How does this little countermeasure from your new master work? Going to leave me here to freeze under his orders? What's to stop me from going to Imil and burning it to the ground?"

"Do you think me so idiotic as to believe you'd harm Mia?" Alex asked, nevertheless giving off a cold and ruthless air, more biting than the snowstorm around them. As much as he thought he had figured Gareth out, sometimes he was unsure as to the lengths he would go to acquire his goals. His rage was certainly something to behold at times, preferably from a very great distance.

"I will never harm Mia," Gareth replied, his words as heated as his very aura. "That much is certain. But I *will* rain fire upon Imil... her home... your home even, and bring pain to her regardless, and you will be to blame. You will be responsible for her suffering, and I'll make sure to pass that message along. Not that it will come as much of a surprise, I'm sure,

given what you've already done to her. But she will *never* look at you with kindness or forgiveness again. Take me back to Vale right now, or I will sever any possibilities at reconciliation that I know you have desperately wanted for so long."

Alex was silent for a moment, knowing Gareth was telling the truth. Inwardly, he cursed himself for following the very specific orders to bring Gareth here in the event of betrayal, due to the proximity of the Mercury Lighthouse which would weaken him. Only now did he realize too late that it had most likely been another test of resolve, and one Alex had played right into. The abilities of the Dark Alchemist to so acutely read and understand those who followed him enraged, and yet fascinated Alex.

"I'll do it, Alex. My family is gone, and my home in ruins. If the last few people closest to me die by that monster's hand, then all I will have left is vengeance. I will dedicate myself to causing you and Isaac pain, and I will do everything and anything I have to do to see it done."

Ignoring the ache somewhere within himself at the very thought of Mia in pain and looking upon him with eyes full of disgust, Alex steeled himself and retorted, "Go on, then. I care nothing for Imil. If you wish to expend your energy for such a useless endeavor, then go right ahead."

"I thought as much," Gareth said with a disgusted shake of his head. "I knew you were scum, the absolute lowest, but I never thought I'd see you willingly choose to be that lunatic's lapdog, faithful right to the bitter end, when you know those you care about will suffer for it. I guess your appearances are not the only things the two of you share..."

Alex felt a pang at Gareth's remark, silently taking comfort in the cold that surrounded them. He could see in Gareth's face the growing discomfort of not only the icy land, but the energies flowing from the glowing sphere of Mercury Lighthouse in the distance, both of which only served to fuel Alex's natural elemental strength. "As usual, you have no comprehension of all that is occurring around you. Although in fairness, I suppose you never had a chance to learn of my stake in this madness, given that I would not trust you to catch a Djinni on your own, let alone be my ally against a threat such as the 'lunatic', as you call him."

"Spare me the usual routine. I do not need to be a scholar to know of your 'stake' in this. You want to seize the dark power from him when his guard is down and lord over Weyard like you always wanted because you deservedly failed the first time. So you're pretending to be a part of his group by being his faithful protector, just as I said. I threatened him, he gave the word, and you came running. There's really only one way to interpret that... one of the almighty Alchemists has now stooped to being little more than a servant. A guard dog whimpering for its bone at best, and a parasite sucking away until it's satisfied at worst. If there's anything, one single damn thing, that I respect Isaac for anymore, it's that I know I'll never see him stoop to your level."

"You..." Alex opened his mouth to retort when he sensed a surge of power somewhere far away, so far that it would normally be difficult to sense, especially with the churning energies of himself, Gareth, and the Mercury Lighthouse surrounding him, but it was there. The look on Gareth's face informed him that he had sensed it as well. "So he has come out of hiding at last. Farewell, Gareth. I have more important matters to attend to." With that, Alex quickly concentrated on his destination, taking advantage of Gareth's distraction, and vanished from sight.

Garet stared straight ahead into the snowy wasteland. He felt... conflicted. Torn between feeling a sense of rage and a sense of gratitude towards the man who had been his closest friend and ally once upon a time, although Garet barely remembered such a time. In the mind of one so full of fire and pain, it may as well have been a friendship that lasted a single day a thousand years ago. And yet the conflict remained. Fleeting, but present all the same.

Then it faded away, burned away by his returning anger. With a turn of his head, the Mars Adept looked in the direction of Imil, clenching his fists at the very thought of Alex, then releasing them almost immediately. "I'm sorry," he spoke aloud. "I'd never do that to you, Mia. Not even to hurt him. I'm sorry I even considered it."

Turning away from the town, Garet began to make his way through the snowy wasteland of the frozen north, walking the path he had walked so many times before. Garet tried to ignore the part of his mind that was telling him that every other time he had walked this path, he had not been completely alone.

"This doesn't change a thing, Isaac. Save them. And then you die."

The dazzling, almost ethereal brightness continued to flare like a beacon, its gloriousness undercut by an animalistic howl. The beast was sent flying backwards by the sheer force of the attack that had struck it head on, smashing right through numerous trees as it flew backwards into the forest.

The light began to dissipate at last. With a wave of a hand, rubble and debris of a destroyed house was cleared away, revealing an unconscious and dying Felix. "*Potent Cure.*" At

these whispered words, small spheres of warm, healing energy flowed into the fallen Venus Adept, his wounds beginning to close upon contact with the light. Moments later, the hand was waved once more, and three fallen bodies upon the wasteland of the Valean plaza began to glow as healing light was distributed to each.

A violent hiss and screech in the distance told him that his fight was not yet won, and he ceased his healing, having granted enough for his friends to remain in good health until they awoke. Thundering footsteps followed, and out of the forest came the lumbering Toadonpa, stopping in its tracks as its eyes fixed upon its new foe. A calm, yet strong wind picked up as the savior of the fallen Adepts floated down from the roof he had been standing on to place both feet onto solid ground once more. He pulled off the small traveler's pack he had slung over his shoulder and tossed it aside.

Azure eyes looked upon the much larger creature with what some would probably think was weariness. The silence of the surrounding land was punctuated by quiet footsteps as the young man walked towards the monster without an ounce of hesitation in his step. But it was not the walk of a confident man, or a man with no fear in his heart. It was the walk of a lost man, who had walked so similarly for so long without a direction or purpose, at long last finding one to justify his very act of being.

The man in blue had his eyes shut, tuning his senses to the events upon the wastes of Vale's town plaza. "Unexpected, but perhaps a blessing in disguise. As long as you continue to sustain the strength of the beast, even the Alchemist may be toppled, especially as he stands alone."

"I will do all that I can," the man in black responded, before speaking in a whisper. "*Murk.*" Through the link of the mind he now shared with the being under his control, a healing power borne of the shadows flowed into Toadonpa, unseen and unable to be sensed by any being besides those tinged with the touch of Dark Alchemy.

"I will make the necessary arrangements should the unthinkable occur." The man in blue turned around to face the newest addition to his ever-growing army. "Proceed to Kalay with the Veiled Sentry. If they have departed by the time you arrive, use their talents to track your targets down. Through whatever means necessary, bring me the dark star of Jupiter. I want them both brought back alive, her and her brother." There was no response or physical acknowledgment from the cursed woman, but the man in blue needed none to know his will would be done.

He then focused his attention on the Dark Murder, who had been waiting patiently with no need for telepathic control from its master. "You will remain here in case you are needed." An inclination of its head indicated that his orders were understood, and at once, the dark forces dispersed, sprinting across the land and disappearing among its natural formations in moments.

The mastermind shut his eyes once more. "Now then, Isaac, if you have the capability, show me why I am to fear Alchemy."

Isaac, tranquil and silent despite the iron grip of his hands upon the hilt of the Sol Blade and the tension of battle coursing through him, awaited a first move from the monster he had faced only six years ago, but what could have been six hundred and felt every bit as distant. Jaws parted, and

Isaac instinctively leapt aside of the black flames that issued forth with a hellish roar. Feeling bits of rock and earth beat at the back of his head, Isaac began to run, the Sol Blade pointed at the sky as he ran forward.

Another Dark Blessing was fired in his direction, and Isaac yelled a command, "*Granite!*" The yellow projection of a Venus Djinni took form and burst into hundreds of tiny yellow particles, which flew at Isaac and formed a golden dome of Venus energy around him. With a deafening crash, the black flames struck Granite's shield head on, and Isaac felt the burn as some of the attack broke through the shield, but his Djinni companion had done its job well, and Isaac was near enough to strike the surprised monster.

Isaac sliced both of Toadonpa's legs, and it let out a pained roar, though Isaac knew from experience that while painful and useful as a distraction, slices with a sword were not particularly effective against the tough hide of the monster. "*Quake Sphere!*" Golden energy surrounded Isaac as his spell was cast, and Toadonpa was bounced into the air multiple times by the rising ground, causing it to painfully fall on its back. "*Odyssey!*" Giving Toadonpa no time to recover, Isaac felt energy fill him as two Psynesergetic projections of earthen swords stabbed at Toadonpa's body, and Isaac swung his sword to unleash a massive third to strike the monster with a dazzling explosion of light.

Toadonpa was flung to the side by the force of the Odyssey spell along the ground, hissing as its claws raked the earth and created large cracks upon the ground as it slowed its skidding body down. A quivering growl escaped Toadonpa as it righted itself, its wounds only intensifying its rage.

Isaac watched with apprehension for a quick second before calling upon his abilities once more, this time searching

deep within himself for the familiar and comfortable sensation of earthen energy, while simultaneously calling upon the alien energy of fire; easily wielded, but still relatively new compared to his lifelong hold on the power of Venus. Feeling the natural power of both elements surge through his body, Isaac slammed the point of his blade upon the ground and spoke, his voice almost a whisper in the din of overflowing Psynergy, *"Earth Split..."*

At once, the ground appeared to crack at the point of the Sol Blade and a crevice glowing golden traveled along the ground in the direction of Toadonpa. The crack traveled right in between the monster's clawed feet and continued until stopping a few yards away.

Toadonpa tilted its head in confusion, unknowing of what had transpired until the mystery was suddenly revealed as glowing lava suddenly exploded from the fissure. The lava spiraled around Toadonpa and it was raised into the air, hissing from the pain of the spell, and it was then suddenly brought back to the ground, an explosion of red and yellow Psynergetic energy exploding upon contact. Within moments, the lights dissipated, leaving only the sight of Toadonpa laying upon the ground, barely moving.

Isaac took deep breaths in and out as he struggled within his mind to focus on gathering his energy once more. Such a powerful attack was far more taxing than the usual Psynergetic spell, but he knew it was not enough to keep the monster down for good just yet. Gathering his strength once more, Isaac began to make his way towards the wounded creature. Its body was covered in bleeding cuts, many of which had been caused by Isaac's blows, but Isaac could see that his friends had managed to wound it as well. He watched as it turned its head to look upon him, letting out a mournful and agonized moan.

Isaac hesitated at the sight of the helpless creature, and instantly regretted it as Toadonpa's moan became a hiss and it lashed out with one of its arms, nowhere near enough to strike Isaac, but some of its blood from its cut hand went flying towards him and Isaac gasped as he felt the stinging, burning sensation of Toadonpa's blood upon the side of his face and one arm. The monster's blood was poison to the touch. Isaac called upon his healing abilities to stop the effects quickly before the damage could become worse, but his momentary distraction was all Toadonpa needed. Isaac just barely saw the oncoming cloud of black fire before it struck him head on, clenching his eyes shut from the pain as it sent him flying backwards, the Sol Blade flying from his grasp.

Calling upon the Psynergy inherently coursing through its body once more, Toadonpa charged forward too quickly for the staggered Isaac to protect himself from, and Psynergetic energy exploded from its body as it smashed right into the Alchemist. Blood flew from Isaac's mouth as he flew backwards and this time slammed into the cold ground.

The monster picked itself up and lumbered forward so that it now towered over Isaac. Without warning, the creature slashed at Isaac's torso, slicing through his shirt, but finding resistance from the light but powerful chain mail shielding him from underneath. Angered by the lack of the blood drawn, Toadonpa raised a foot to crush the body of the fragile human at its mercy. Isaac rolled out of the way, feeling the vibrations of the crash. Isaac tried to stand, still fighting the pain from the earlier blow, but Toadonpa's tail swung out of nowhere in Isaac's vision and sent him back to the ground, lying on his back. With his right arm outstretched and defenseless, Isaac sensed rather than saw Toadonpa raise its other foot, and squeezed his eyes shut as it came stomping down upon his arm with all of its weight.

For a split-second, Isaac's mind was devoid of all thought as the bones in his arm shattered, and in the next, he let out a long scream of utter agony, unable to fight the pain any longer. When it was over, he seemed to go limp and let his head fall backward, a haze of red in his vision, clouding all thought and ability to utilize his Psynergy.

Toadonpa pressed its foot down on Isaac's torso, pinning him in place. It then lowered its head towards Isaac's face, baring its teeth with a hungry hiss. Sensing submission, the creature opened its mouth and prepared to devour its meal, just as Isaac choked out his only hope, "V-Venus..."

At once, the glowing form of Granite appeared and dove into the ground. As soon as it did, huge yellow blasts of Psynergy exploded from the ground below Isaac. Isaac shut his eyes in pain as the blasts hit Toadonpa and himself, but the job was done, and the monster was off of him, knocked backwards onto its back yet again. Falling back to earth, Isaac forced himself to his feet, placing one hand over his mangled and useless arm as he staggered away from the monster as fast as he could go and concentrated as hard as he possibly could, knowing from experience that such an injury required absolute control to heal in a timely manner.

Back on its feet and balancing its huge frame, Toadonpa looked around wildly, wasting no time in giving chase to its fleeing prey. Isaac cursed softly as it neared, his arm not yet healed. The monster raised a claw, ready to strike him yet again, but a flash of red and purple flared to life out of nowhere and brightened the area around the two as a fireball and a bolt of lightning struck the head of Toadonpa, the surprise knocking it off balance.

Toadonpa was given no time to right itself as glowing shards of ice rained down upon it next and exploded upon contact,

sending it to the ground under their weight. Confused, the monster gazed about once again, its eyes fixing upon three of those it had felled not moments ago in the distance, on their feet but clearly not in any shape to use attacks capable of seriously wounding it. Baring its teeth, Toadonpa trembled with rage and prepared to finish what it had started.

Fortunately, Isaac's eyes then shot open, his arm still burning with pain but its bones healed, and immediately brought one palm to face the ground to blast away from his current position with a gust of wind, while his other waved in the direction of his opponent, sending a chunk of earth from the ground smashing into it to get its attention.

Isaac hit the ground running, his eyes on his Sol Blade, sliding upon the dirt to grab the hilt and then forcing himself up to his feet in a fluid movement. Focused yet again, Isaac ran forward just as Toadonpa focused its attention solely on him once again and rocketed towards its head with the wind literally at his back as he performed a spiraling kick to its head with a flash of Jupiter Psynergy. Toadonpa was stunned by the attack, and Isaac called out, "*Flint!*" Another Venus Djinni appeared and immediately burst into yellow particles and seeped into Isaac's sword, which was brought smashing into Toadonpa's torso as Isaac landed upon the ground once more.

"*Bane!*" A third Djinni appeared, disappearing into the Sol Blade as well, but giving it a reddish glow as Isaac smashed his blade into the creature's toughened torso once again, eliciting another roar. Isaac felt the energies of Bane and Flint fill him as he set into motion his final phase of attack. "*Ramses!*"

With a quake of the ground at his command, what appeared to be a pyramid-like structure with an enormous skull

adorning the top rose from the ground, a symbol of an ancient god. A floating stone hand floated out of the building and slammed right into Toadonpa, causing yet another blinding explosion that brightened the entire plaza. Gravity brought the flying Toadonpa smashing into the ground again and it howled in pain, but this time Isaac blocked out any and all hesitation. "*Grand Gaia!*"

The ground beneath Toadonpa split like before, but a golden glow erupted from the fissure this time, sending the monster into the air, along with boulders from deep within the earth that struck it numerous times. When it ended, Toadonpa crashed back to the ground upon its back. Severely beaten and exhausted, the dying creature let out a low moan to the sky. It could feel the presence of dark healing energy filling its body again, the power that prolonged its terrible suffering. It was only somewhat aware of the sensation of its enemy leaping upon its stomach as it continued to lay back upon the ground. And then the enemy's weapon was driven into its chest with an almighty force, piercing its rapidly beating heart. The moans of Toadonpa slowed and were soon reduced to desperate gasps for breath, which also slowed and faded away within moments, leaving only one solitary breath that slowly changed into a death rattle.

The Monster of Lunpa had finally fallen.

The Sol Blade was yanked out from the chest of the felled beast, dripping with dark blood. Isaac walked a few steps up the monster's large chest before raising his blade. Calling upon Psynergy to empower his strike, he gave a mighty swing at Toadonpa's neck, slicing its head clean off. His work done, Isaac appeared to look skyward, but his eyes were closed, finally allowing himself to be tranquil for the time being now that his first struggle of the night was over.

Isaac opened his eyes and turned his head back to where his friends still remained, watching in silence, looking like human statues from this distance. Wasting no time, Isaac began running in their direction, slowing his run when he was only a few feet away from them, stopping short as if a barrier he could not cross was surrounding them. "How are you feeling? Do any of you need further healing?"

He watched silently as each shook their heads and spoke soft words of refusal. Inwardly, he wished things were currently not so dire and that he had left his home behind under more optimal circumstances that would allow him to react as one was expected to act when faced with good friends after a long period of time without their company.

Isaac watched as their eyes flickered to the corpse of Toadonpa and back to him. No one said anything for a moment, and their looks as they regarded Isaac did not seem so different from how he expected a group of people would react to the arrival of someone they had already been seeing day by day, as though he had never left. And while a small part of Isaac, a more selfish part perhaps, felt a slight tinge of sadness at this, his more logical side broke through and reminded him that his friends were intelligent and perceptive people, and already understood on some level that his return was not a happy occasion, but one that would bring the sound of thunder that invited a coming storm.

"My brother?" Jenna suddenly asked in a timid voice, the voice of someone who was frightened to know the answer to a query.

"I was able to cure him in time," Isaac replied, feeling a small relief inside as Jenna seemed to almost glow at the news, breaking the solemn demeanor she had had moments ago. "Come on, I'll show you. He should be..."

Isaac looked in the direction of the destroyed home, where Felix was kneeling upon the rubble, clearly still in pain and unable to stand upright just yet. But Isaac's attention was not on Felix, but the sight of blue. A dark, horrible shade of blue approaching from right behind the unsuspecting Venus Adept.

"Isaac, who is...?" Jenna started.

"Felix, behind you!"

Jenna, Sheba, and Piers instantly felt their blood run cold at the sound of pure fear and urgency in Isaac's voice, and they could only watch in shock as Isaac raised his hand in preparation for a Psynergy spell. Each abruptly turning towards their fallen friend, their eyes widened at the sight of Felix looking at them in utter surprise that mirrored their own, and a figure with a face that was familiar to them all, save for the empty eyes of blackness.

"A-Alex?" Sheba whispered in shock.

Wasting no time, *A/*lex grabbed hold of Felix's shoulder with a smile in the direction of Isaac, and black particles of Psynergy with a blue glow surrounding them took shape all around the two Adepts. An explosive sound beside Sheba made her jump and she turned to see Isaac had issued forth a blast of concussive Psynergy at the blue-haired man.

But an almost uncaring wave of his hand formed a black Psynergetic shield around *A/*lex and Felix, and the shield appeared to shatter like glass from Isaac's blast, leaving the caster unharmed. The shield remained as the teleportation continued. The look of absolute fear on Felix's face was all Jenna saw before he vanished into thin air, and she could only scream in desperation.

Silence fell over the group, and all that was heard was the soft pattering of rain upon the earth.

"Felix..." It was Piers who spoke through a violent shiver as he recalled the talk he had had with *Alex* during the battle, particularly the horrific end the puppet bandit had met when their talk had concluded. It had been then that Piers realized that Alex was playing with forces beyond his comprehension. He only hoped that that horrid Alchemist would be merciful to his friend.

"*Damn it...*" The sound of Isaac's left fist creating a small crack in the ground below made three pairs of eyes turn towards him. The look on his face was livid. "I'm a complete fool."

"Isaac, what... what the hell just happened?!" Jenna found her voice and could only yell. She could not, would not, accept that her reunion with her brother had been cut short so easily. "What... where did Alex take him?"

"I don't know," Isaac replied, sounding detached as he glared straight ahead at the spot where Felix had disappeared.

"You don't know?" Jenna asked incredulously. "Just like that?"

"I'm not all knowing," Isaac said, quickly seeking to remedy his harsh tone. "Ordinarily, I could try sensing them. It wouldn't be easy, but I would have an idea of where to go. But their powers are not entirely like ours... they can... cloud themselves in it. It's how they mask their presence from me."

I know, Isaac told himself, steeling his resolve. I know what I'm doing. It's not entirely false, but I could pinpoint them if I had to. Forgive me, Jenna... you of all people deserve

nothing but the truth, but we can't fight them when they have the advantage and the upper hand. The only choice we have is to protect as many lives as possible. This is what is right.

"What... are you talking about?" Sheba asked, feeling a chill at his voice and words. "I don't understand a word of this."

Isaac expelled a breath. "I'm sorry. I need to explain so much to all of you, and this only complicates things. We... we need to get somewhere safe... or at least safer than here." Isaac tuned his senses to the new village of Vale, immediately feeling waves of energy overwhelm his mind and senses as they always did when he allowed them to. The town was thick with the energy of the natural elements that made up the town, but also the life energies of survivors still trying to evacuate the town.

In an instant, Isaac specifically sought out one specific energy signature that differed from the rest, quickly able to ascertain where it was coming from.

Isaac let out a sigh as he let go of his concentration and felt the energies float away from him. He raised a hand and called upon the traveler's pack he had tossed aside to the grasp of his outstretched hand once more, slinging it over his shoulder before turning back to his companions. "Come on, we have to get to the town sanctum. It'll at least be safer than here. The Great Healer is there, and I'm sure he'll want to hear what I have to say as well."

"How do you know that?" Piers asked.

"I can sense him within Vale. As his energy is not fading away, it can only be there that he has chosen to take refuge. For the moment, anyway."

"But if you could find the Great Healer, why can't you find Felix?"

"Vale is... free of their influence right now. I could tune my senses to the elemental energies in Vale much easier and find him. Felix, on the other hand, is enshrouded by their energy."

"Well, I'm not going anywhere without him," Jenna snapped, glaring at Isaac. "You're not seriously suggesting we just... just abandon him out there with that freak?!"

"Jenna, we don't have a choice," Isaac replied. "I truly don't mean to rush you, but this is... this is more important than Felix. Trust me when I say he would believe that too."

"Yes, well, my brother also believed leaving me alone without so much as a goodbye for years was a smart idea, so frankly, I don't care what he would *believe*," Jenna snapped in reply before her tone immediately became pleading. "Isaac, please. You have to try again, whatever it is you're doing! Try to sense them again or whatever. *Please...*"

Sheba, silent and observant, had been scanning Isaac's face and eyes. Indeed, she had peered into minds so often, Isaac's included a fair few times in the past, that she had become accustomed to noticing when a person's words did not match their demeanor, even without the aid of her natural ability. It was not a telltale sign of their thoughts, of course, but it was enough to know when they had something to hide. And Sheba could tell Isaac most certainly had something to hide.

Could he really be lying? He would not look so unsure of his words if he wasn't... but how can I be sure it's not just nerves? Who knows what he has been through and seen all these years? Unfortunately, I can't just peer into his mind to

figure it out. No doubt he has learned to veil his thoughts like everyone else has. But if he is lying, then the question is why? He did not want Felix to be taken like that, that much is clear. So why would he not want to help him?

Sheba sharply took in a breath as Isaac looked right at her, away from Jenna, his piercing azure eyes staring into her own. The courageousness she had associated with the eyes of Isaac was nowhere in sight. *Is he simply afraid of... "them"? And if so... then I am afraid as well. I don't even want to imagine what kind of power frightens an Alchemist. Still, he has to be saying all this for good reason. Besides, we're still hurt, and exhausted. The only way we can help anyone right now is to gather more information than we have now.*

"Jenna," Sheba spoke up. "Please calm down. I don't want to leave Felix either, but it sounds like he already knows what's going on, and I know he would want you to learn everything you can about—"

Pain. A stinging pain in Sheba's right cheek left her stunned, at a loss for any kind of thought. In the corner of her eye, she saw both Isaac and Piers staring at her in complete surprise. Then she turned to look forward to see Jenna staring at her with an absolutely livid expression, balling the hand she had just slapped Sheba with. Her best and closest friend looked like she wanted to kill her, and the thought hurt Sheba deeply.

"*How dare you?*" Jenna hissed. "How dare you try to speak for him *now*? After all these years... all these years, Sheba! You knew! Didn't you?! You knew he was out there! You knew and you never told me! Am I right?!"

Sheba could not bring herself to speak, and it was all the answer Jenna needed.

"Jenna, please," Piers protested, attempting to get in between the two. "Now is not the time..."

"What is wrong with you?!" Jenna screamed at Sheba, pushing Piers aside and slapping Sheba again. "How could you?! I thought you were my friend!"

"Jenna..." Sheba choked out, holding back a sob. "I wanted... I wanted to. I truly did, but..."

"But what? He told you not to? Do you... do you even realize, what you put me through? Both of you?!" Jenna's voice quivered with anger, but the sound of pure sadness and hurt seeped through every word. "I wanted to die... just die... so many times. I felt like I was alone. And you knew... you knew and you kept his secret from me. I don't give a damn what he told you to do... you had no right. You betrayed me, Sheba. You betrayed me..."

"I'm sorry," Sheba cried out, tears rolling down her face. "Jenna... I'm so sorry..."

"Shut up," Jenna spoke, suddenly looking pained. "Just... shut up..." She shut her eyes and clenched her teeth as she put her hands to her fevered head, rubbing furiously at her temples as she seemed to sway a bit in her step. It hurt so much. She heard Sheba gasp and heard footsteps before feeling Sheba's hands on her shoulders, steadying her.

Jenna opened her eyes again to look at Sheba. Tears continued to roll down the face of the Jupiter Adept as she gripped Jenna's shoulders tightly, keeping her from falling over from dizziness. Through her pained haze, the thought occurred to Jenna that Sheba was worried about her and

wanted to comfort her in her time of need, even after Jenna had screamed at her and slapped her. The thought pained Jenna even worse than her damned fever. She wanted nothing more than to embrace her dear friend, tell her that she *did* forgive her. But the bubbling rage would not allow it.

"Don't touch me," Jenna rasped, pushing Sheba away.

"Okay," Sheba whispered, heartbreak still present in her voice as she stepped away from Jenna, a tone which betrayed the look in her eyes which met Jenna's with a matching fierceness. "Whatever you ask, I'll do, Jenna. Until you're ready to forgive me."

"Jenna... you... you're still sick," Piers said softly, moving forward to grasp Jenna's shoulders in place of Sheba as Jenna once again wobbled in her step. "Please, just... just calm yourself."

"I am," Jenna spoke almost under her breath. "I am calm... now." She turned to face Isaac, pulling away from Piers' hold and walking forward, nothing but melancholy in her gaze. "Hell with it. You win, Isaac. I'll follow you."

Isaac remained silent as he watched the scene unfold before him. Jenna's dreary and tired voice as she looked at him with false determination, Piers' worried look at her and back at Sheba, and Sheba herself... only managing to give Jenna a silent and sorrowful look.

Isaac let out a sigh and extended his left hand out to her. "Everyone link your hands together. I can't teleport like Alex, but a Retreat spell can get us as far as the sanctum, at least."

Jenna took one of his hands, looking behind her and intentionally reaching out to Piers, who looked guiltily at

Sheba as he took Jenna's hand and offered his other hand to the Jupiter Adept. Sheba absentmindedly took his hand, no longer crying, and simply looking at the ground in silence.

"Get ready. *Retreat.*"

It was a sensation that three of the teleporting Adepts were not familiar with, save for when they had wielded the power of the now lost Teleport Lapis so long ago. It was a feeling like being lifted off of the ground as the world around them seemed to fade away for a brief moment, their view filled with an array of colors before they felt their feet hit the ground once more, and the world seemed to come back into focus. The four Adepts found themselves looking at the holy-looking structure of the Vale sanctum, where the healers of the settlement had used their knowledge to prolong the lives of ailed or wounded townspeople. Although in recent times, some would say that they only prolonged the suffering of the townspeople.

"Come on," Isaac said in a rush as he began making his way towards the stone doors of the sanctum, his three companions following as he pushed them open and entered the chamber. As they entered, Isaac took one last look outside, surveying the area for anyone who might be watching, and willed the doors to shut with the aid of his power.

The Vale Sanctum was a replica of its original, made up of a single, circular chamber, enough to fit a small group of people. The two torches that were burning on the walls offered little light, but it was enough to perceive all that was transpiring. Isaac recalled that it was within the sanctum of his home where his journey six years ago had begun, and though this was not the original, he felt the flood of pleasing memories come rushing back nonetheless.

In the center of the room was an unconscious Lunpa thief lying in the center of the chamber, his body surrounded by three Valean elder healers, as well as the Great Healer of Vale himself. The Healer had his head bowed as he raised both hands into the air over the thief of Lunpa, his body glowing with Psynergy. Isaac regarded the man for a brief moment, recalling the respect and slight intimidation he had felt as a younger man whenever he felt the gaze of the revered Great Healer fall upon him.

"I will tend to you," one of the elders spoke softly, turning and nearing as the group entered. "Please be silent. Do not disturb the Great Healer. He is attempting to rid this man of the awful curse plaguing him."

"Save your energy," Isaac spoke loudly, bringing numerous gazes in his direction. "You are wasting it on him. This kind of power is beyond your ability to heal."

"Who are you to question...?" The speaking elder froze, finally noticing who was speaking to in the dim light of the torches. "You... are Isaac, aren't you?"

His name caught the attention of the rest of the occupants of the sanctum, including the Great Healer, who lowered his arms, ceasing his healing. Isaac did not respond nor react to the numerous eyes upon him as he strode forward towards the center of the chamber. They watched as Isaac raised a hand, his palm facing down towards the man on the ground. A purple glow surrounded his body, and Sheba could almost feel it resonate with her, as if to signify that it was indeed Jupiter energy. Isaac then spoke in a whisper, "*Growth.*" Green vines glowing with Venus energy suddenly ensnared the man's body, tying down his arms and legs. With a wave of his hand, Isaac sent the man sliding across the floor and

the still unconscious body struck the far wall of the chamber opposite the entrance.

"Isaac?!" One of the elders gasped in surprise.

"What is the meaning of this?" The Great Healer asked, his aged voice tinged with uncharacteristic confusion and alarm.

"Had he been unbound the moment he woke up, the first thought he would have had on his mind is how best to tear each of you to pieces with his bare hands. Naturally, I would suggest killing him now, but I still remember our laws. I will not profane this sanctum with murder. I will deal with him later. For now, you must all stay silent and listen, if you wish to know more about what has happened tonight."

All was silent once more as Isaac began to rummage through the pack he had brought with him. A few seconds later Isaac pulled out a bag made from Mythril. Isaac pulled off the small string that kept the bag shut and let it fall to reveal what appeared to be a black sphere that would seem to be made of glass, though its mere presence seemed to indicate that the idea of breaking it was foolish. Within the sphere would have only appeared to be a swirling shroud of blackness were it not for a tiny, but visible reddish glow in the center of it. All eyes were upon this strange artifact. There was nothing to suggest that it was an inherently dangerous object, but the haunted look on Isaac's face when he gazed upon it said all they needed to know.

"This orb is called a Dark Elemental Star. Yes, just like the four stars we became acquainted with years ago, and it too belongs to a lighthouse."

Piers fidgeted, his mind on the encounter with the wicked voice speaking through the puppet thief, though no one

noticed his discomfort.

"You mean it's needed to flare a lighthouse beacon? There's another lighthouse?" Jenna asked confusedly, leaning back against the wall of the chamber for support as she felt another headache.

"Not necessarily. You see that red light inside of it? It is a symbol of Mars Energy. The purpose of this star is to be cast into the orb of the Mars Lighthouse. The same is true for each of its companions, each meant for its respective lighthouse. The effects of which would be disastrous for us all." Isaac placed the artifact upon the floor, in the center of the chamber, before stepping back from it and speaking again. "Three years ago... three years after we fired the four beacons, a fifth lighthouse appeared. It was erected centuries ago to prepare for what is about to transpire from this day forward."

A silence met his words, all with looks of incomprehension. The Great Healer broke the silence. "What does this lighthouse represent, if not one of the four elements?"

"The element of darkness. Now, listen closely. I'm going to tell you everything, and I only have time to tell you once."

Silence fell, and Isaac began.

"The histories and the legends we have heard all our lives, the ones that tell us of Alchemy being locked away, are only half-true. It *was* sealed due to the strife man had created for himself and the lighthouses were needed to unlock it. That much is true. But the seal of Alchemy actually came as a direct result of the creation of this... fifth element.

"As we know, at some point in time, the people of Weyard began to utilize Alchemy for their own selfish gains. What

we were never told was that there were some people who crossed a boundary in their pursuits for power and a higher plane of existence... and in doing so, discovered and became immersed in the... *other side* of Alchemy's power. It is difficult to explain, but just look at it as the difference between what we know of us as light and dark. All we know of is the light. These ancient Adepts perceived the dark.

"They believed themselves to be the founders of this power, chosen by fate itself. In reality, this darker side of Alchemy is as natural as any of the elements we understand. But as I said, it requires a true thirst to discover its secret to be found within the ether of our collective energies. Such drive was then rewarded with incredible power. As such, with delusions of their own importance, these people began to spread their knowledge of the darkness and began gathering followers. They came to call themselves the Dark Alchemists.

"Soon after they began gathering power, the Dark Alchemists began to make demands of more and more people to join their cause. They believed that cause was divine, and to refuse and oppose it was to live in perpetual ignorance and shame. And so, under the pretense of fixing the world's ills, they began to wage war on Weyard.

"They worked in secret at first, spreading distrust between settlements and people, driving them to wage war on one another never knowing who the true enemy was. Their goal was to demolish the existing structure of the world at the time. Ironically, their ultimate desire was a world of true peace. Their core belief was that only by becoming unified under one great power and one great clan could there ever be peace, and that the four elements were inherently chaotic and would forever divide the people of Weyard. Once in a while, one of their numbers would slip up and be

discovered, and eventually, the assorted crises occurring during this strange war were traced back to their source.

"In the end, one crucial battle was fought between the Dark Alchemists and a large group of those who utilized the four elements we know of, known then as Pure Alchemists. Despite their great power, the Dark Alchemists were far less in number than Pure Alchemists, and were no match against the continuous assaults of the Pure Alchemists. Many Dark Alchemists were killed, and the survivors fled, forced to go into hiding. I can't really describe the level of destruction the cult caused, but from what I've been told by the Wise One, Weyard very nearly tore itself apart. That is why Alchemy was seen as more of a threat to Weyard than a blessing. The rest... well, we already know."

Everyone in the chamber could only stare in silence and awe as they absorbed every word Isaac spoke, words that turned upside down everything they had ever known of their history.

"Why haven't any of us ever heard about this until now? Wouldn't there be records kept of such a crisis?" Jenna finally spoke up.

"I agree," Piers spoke up with a quizzical look. "Not even the eldest Lemurians ever recounted such tales..."

"Like I said, the people of the time did not know who the true enemy was for the majority of the time period. As for the battle itself, if any records of it were ever kept, they were all destroyed at some point in the past by our ancestors."

"Why would they do that?" Jenna asked with a hint of anger in her voice. Beside her, Sheba took notice, and resisted the urge to give a small smile. The fear that she had felt when hearing Isaac recount the terrifying tale slowly ebbed away

when she heard Jenna's strength returning in her voice. Though the memory of the anger directed towards her still caused a deep pain, she nevertheless felt comforted knowing that Jenna's fiery spirit was still very much alive. It gave her hope.

"I cannot specify their intentions, but I can only guess that since it was an extremely dark period of Weyard's history, not just because of the war but because of all the wrongdoings of the people at the time, they simply tried to wipe out the memory. A foolish decision in retrospect, but if the truth had been told from the beginning, would you have been able to so willingly allow Alchemy to return to the world?"

Jenna did not answer, thinking hard. A sudden memory of the day she and her friends had finally arrived in Lemuria filled her mind. What was it that Lunpa had said?

"Knowledge gained in one generation should be taken even further by the next." Jenna clenched one of her fists tightly. She felt betrayed. She had always been told to revere the memory of the great Valean ancestors, but they had intentionally left the generations that followed blind to all that had transpired in the past. Great ancestors, indeed.

"So all the conflicts we have heard of throughout Weyard's history were caused by these... Dark Alchemists?" Sheba asked softly, her head still spinning from this deluge of information.

Isaac smirked cynically. "I think we all wish history were that kind. But no. By the time they began to take action against Weyard, many conflicts had already begun, furthering their beliefs that a world governed by the four elements could not survive. As we saw for ourselves during our journey, many towns and cities of Weyard have held on to age-old

prejudices and grudges to this day. It's better to say that they planted the seeds of distrust in an already tense time to ensure that there was no way the world could recover. Of course, whether the world would have recovered even if they hadn't waged their war is... well, I would say doubtful, but I suppose it is truly unknown.

"In any case, everything that has happened in the past few years is connected to the day our journey ended. The release of darkness was an inevitable price to pay for unlocking Alchemy."

"You're saying we caused all this," Piers stated, not asking a question.

"Somewhat, but it should not be looked at as blame. This is just one of the possible fates the Wise One foresaw befalling Weyard if we succeeded in our mission. There's also the chance that none of this would have ever happened at all, but it did, so there is not much use in dwelling on that." At this, unbeknownst to the reflecting Isaac, Sheba's eyes narrowed slightly, once again hearing a certain insecurity in his words that did not match their meaning.

"The Wise One told me that during the fall of the Dark Alchemists, those that harnessed the powers of Jupiter foretold that the Pure Alchemists would eventually have no choice but to release the powers of Alchemy again."

"They prophesized the breaking of the seal that long ago?" Sheba asked, momentarily in awe at such a powerful form of prophecy.

"Yes, and that Alchemy itself would be transferred into the hands of two people so far into the future. Another core belief of the cult was that humans were inherently self-serving, that all truly wished to experience the powers

granted by Dark Alchemy and needed only to be shown the way. By extension, they felt that whoever was granted the power of Alchemy after the breaking of the seal would inevitably succumb to the same greed that had both given birth to and destroyed the Dark Alchemists. And they weren't wrong."

Sheba raised an eyebrow. "But you were given Alchemy's power..."

Isaac gave a wry smile. "My secret is out, it seems. Don't worry. I didn't have any mad aspirations of overtaking the world, but... well, as you all know, my powers were volatile when I left Vale. Dangerous. They frightened everyone, but most of all myself. Even more so when I was all alone. I had only received part of the Golden Sun's energy, with Alex taking the rest. And still that was enough to make me a danger to myself and everyone around me. It was... a difficult time, and I'll leave it at that.

"But after months and months, as I trained and attempted to hone my abilities, I became aware of... something beyond. It came to me in dreams and visions and eventually began to tempt me as I harnessed Alchemy's pure power. It was the call of Dark Alchemy, and I began to seek it out. I thought... that if I could take this power for myself, I could control what was happening to me. I could restore my life. Somehow, I knew the risks. Intrinsically, I knew. But I didn't care. I wanted to discover this strange sensation. And... I did."

Isaac paused for a moment, seeming to reminisce about something painful for a brief second before continuing.

"As you probably have guessed by now, Alex survived the collapse of Mt. Aleph. It probably comes as no surprise to you that he intended to use Alchemy to further his own

gains. Alex is many things, but unmotivated when he sees his prize is not one of them. Undoubtedly, the call of Dark Alchemy for him was the possibility of gaining what he needed to become the Alchemist he felt he deserved to be. He too, succeeded in his goal."

Isaac looked down at the dark star upon the floor before calling it back to his hand, then calling the Mythril bag to his other, placing it inside once again and tying the bag shut. He then looked up with a grim look on his face.

"As I said, this star, and its companions, were created by the Dark Alchemists centuries ago for the purposes of being tossed into the orbs of power atop each of the four lighthouses. Upon doing so, the elements would be... 'converted', I believe the word is. They would be seized by the power of darkness. The products of these elements... in other words, the monsters that we all fought so many times, would be affected, as well as anybody who was also granted abilities by the Psynergy stones all those years ago. These Lunpa men that you fought tonight were under a Psynergic curse, but the same idea would apply to these creatures and people. Depending on their elemental abilities, the lighthouses would affect them. Their eyes would blacken, and they would be driven to kill every living thing that is not tinged with darkness."

Isaac lifted the Mythril bag. "Manticores, Salamanders, Dragons... all manner of dangerous creatures affected by the power of Mars would become even more of an uncontrollable threat, because of this. And the same goes for the rest of the stars. When each of the four lighthouses is converted, the doors to the fifth lighthouse will open. Inside the lighthouse is the final piece of the puzzle. A fifth star, representing nothing but Dark Alchemy itself. It would then be cast into the lighthouse, and the caster could then enshroud the

world in an everlasting and irreparable darkness. Only that would then bring peace to the creatures and stop the destruction, in accordance with the original doctrine of the Dark Alchemists."

"If the men who attacked tonight were under the influence of a curse, then there are still... 'Dark Alchemists' that remain?" The Great Healer asked.

"In a manner of speaking." Isaac placed the Mythril bag into his traveler's pack once more before slinging it over his shoulder. "This is the crux of everything I have said to you, everyone. As I speak, there are two Dark Alchemists walking among us." He looked at his friends specifically. "You have seen one tonight. That... person you saw abduct Felix. That was not Alex. He shares his appearance, yes, but it is not him. Alex is still alive, and is working with the Dark Alchemists."

He continued before any questions could be asked. "The ancient Dark Alchemists knew they would need agents in this time period to ensure that their plan would at least have a chance of succeeding. As such, the very last remnants of the cult conducted a strange ritual, harnessing powers none of us could even imagine. Two members were selected, and they... *transferred* themselves into the ether. Their physical bodies were destroyed, but their spirits endured, and slept for centuries until the day that they would be needed once more.

"They are the reason Alex and I heard the call of the darkness, far clearer than the ancient people who discovered it. And so when we delved into Dark Alchemy, we released them unwittingly. Since their bodies ceased to exist, they have taken on both of our forms. Another Alex, and another... me, noticeable only by their black eyes, like

the men who attacked tonight. They are the ones responsible for this war, or at least providing the means for it to begin. I certainly won't excuse Dodonpa's choices, or the choices of anyone else who took their offers.

"But there have been those who became aware of their existence, and either by actively seeking them out or accepting their offers when confronted, they have been working to undermine their plans for years. You know them well. Hama, Maha, and Felix." Isaac looked in Jenna's direction. "I won't excuse his choices either, but at the heart of it all, he has been working to stop them, and didn't want you to get involved. All he ever wanted was to keep you safe, questionable though his way of going about it was."

Jenna did not reply, looking down at the floor of the chamber with an unreadable expression. Beside her, Sheba kept her gaze on her friend, a guilty look crossing her face. Not even she had known of Felix's true intentions for staying so silent about his dealings, and a part of her wished to make that known to Jenna, though she knew now was not the time.

"So what do we do now that we know all this?" Jenna finally asked, looking back up to Isaac. "How can we help?"

"I wish I could give you a clear cut plan of mine, but there simply isn't one until they make their move. In fact, I did not wish to involve you all in the fighting. My intentions for telling you all this was simply because you have a right to know. Going out to attack them would be foolish for numerous reasons. All I do know is that Ivan has been in contact with Hama, and thus would know more than any of us about their dealings with the Dark Alchemists. As such, I've decided to head to Kalay to gather more information there."

"What exactly was it that they were seeking to do tonight, these Dark Alchemists?" Piers asked suddenly. "Why attack Vale? Why attack us?"

"Their intentions were to draw me out by bringing you all to harm. They know that I have the dark Mars star. They've been chasing me for a long time now, but they have not taken action like this until now. I don't know what prompted them to do so. Up until recently, they had gathered the rest of the stars, but are now only in possession of the Mercury star. We can thank the saboteurs for that. I can only guess, but I would think these setbacks agitated them, forcing them to try to take a more direct approach, despite it bringing them into the open. I imagine they prefer working in secret, like they did ages ago."

"I see." Piers nodded his understanding at the explanation. After a few moments of everyone's silence, he finally spoke up. "Well, if there is nothing else, Isaac, we can use my ship to get us to Kalay faster, by water or air, if need be."

Isaac gave the Lemurian a slightly surprised look. "It... *would* be an immense help. But I would not ask that of you. As I said, I did not come here looking to enlist any of you. If need be, I will travel alone."

"These people involved us the moment they arrived," Piers replied fiercely. "I will not speak for Jenna and Sheba, but I will not abide by their actions. You have my ship, Isaac."

Isaac nodded in appreciation, looking towards the two women he had once called his teammates. "Like I said, your decisions are yours alone. Vale may still need protection. And Jenna... Felix *is* still alive. You know if there is even the slightest chance, I would bring Felix back to you."

"Would you?" Jenna asked, and Isaac was taken aback at the frosty tone. Jenna seemed to become aware of it herself, and quickly whispered, "I'm sorry. I... I understand, Isaac. I understand why you chose to leave him behind. But... you still left him behind, and without an ounce of hesitation. I don't think I'm wrong to feel a little unsure."

Isaac tried to find a reply, but was stopped by Jenna's next words. "Still, it doesn't really matter now. I'm going. I won't just sit by while my brother is out there. Even if it's just to find him dead, I have to know."

Another nod from Isaac signified his understanding, and he then looked towards Sheba, who gave the slightest hint of a smile. "I think refusing to go at this point would make me look pretty bad, after all that's been said. But don't bother asking." Sheba's eyes flickered in the direction of Jenna for a second before returning to Isaac. "In many ways and for many reasons, they've personally involved me as well. Count me in."

"Alright." Isaac nodded again before turning to Piers. "Where is your ship?"

"The river closest to Vale, I can take you to it," the Lemurian responded. "And don't worry, it's quite safe. I never leave the orb to the ship unguarded."

"Good," Isaac said, turning to the silent Great Healer and the other elders. "I would suggest you go to the north caves with the others. It should be safe now for you to get there, but it may not be forever."

The elders looked rather affronted at being ordered, but the Great Healer spoke softly. "I understand. You have been given a difficult task, and we swore you to it all those years ago without truly thinking of what that would entail. Go with

my blessing and sincerest apologies for all that you suffered in your isolation, Isaac."

"Thank you," Isaac spoke, his voice filled with a reverence that would seem uncharacteristic to someone who had lived alongside him for the past six years.

The Healer looked towards the other three saviors of Weyard. "Once again, fate would seem to have plans for each of you, plans that include carrying the fates of us all. I cannot offer you anything besides my thanks and unending gratitude for your immeasurable bravery. Go too with my hopes for your safe return, each of you."

Piers, Sheba, and Jenna were all about to respond with their own words of thanks, when a voice spoke out from the far corner of the room, a voice that made Isaac's blood run cold. *"Accept my gratitude as well, Isaac."*

All eyes moved to the Lunpan man once slumped against the far wall, now slowly beginning to rise up off the ground, levitating in the air, still bound by the Psynergetic vines. His eyes were open, his face seemed frozen in a cold smile, and a voice escaped from his mouth that everyone in the chamber knew was not his own. *"You have made it far simpler than I thought it would be to discover your next plan of action. Your good friend is already on his way to Kalay."*

Isaac cursed under his breath and unsheathed his Sol Blade, starting towards the cursed man, but a collective gasp escaped from the fearful onlookers behind him as the man threw his head back and screamed in complete agony as black bolts of electricity ran through him. In seconds, the body slumped to the floor, lifeless, his wide open black eyes slowly changing into their true color. The man had had blue eyes.

The same strange sensation that had filled everyone who had looked upon the terrifying and destructive void made itself known once more, and everyone quickly looked away and towards the entrance of the sanctum. Without warning, Isaac flung open the doors with a blast of Psynergy and ran outside, followed by his three companions, feeling the warmth and familiarity leave him immediately.

Standing several feet away from the sanctum was the man in blue. *Alex*. With an amused smile, he turned and began to run. Without needing anyone to give the command, his enemies quickly began to give chase as he sped through what was left of the village of Vale, heading towards the plaza. Isaac fired a blast wave of Psynergy at *Alex* but he dodged fluidly, merely spinning to the right before continuing his run, not at all impeded by the blast of dirt and grass to his left.

In moments, the chase was over as he stopped in the middle of the plaza, the monstrous corpse of Toadonpa able to be seen a few yards away. He whirled around to face his pursuers, his chillingly amused expression never fading as his pursuers neared his position, weapons ready. He did not even flinch as a sudden and very powerful Plasma blast from above sent them all flying.

Sheba immediately started to pick herself up, grasping her Nebula Wand from the ground and looking around wildly for the source of the surprise attack. A burst of light in front of her answered that question, and familiar blue hair caught her eye. Her eyes widened as she quickly realized the intentions of the attacker. "*Isaac!*"

It was too late. As Isaac had begun to pick himself up as well, Alex had grabbed a hold of his shoulders, and with a flash of blue light, both men vanished into thin air.

Feeling all hope drain away from her, Sheba shook off the shock and her instincts told her to regroup with the others. Looking around wildly, she saw Jenna beginning to get up as well, a dazed expression on her face after having been hit with the brunt of the Plasma spell's blinding light. Feeling a surge of sympathy for her friend, Sheba immediately ran over, helping her up to her feet. "Come on, Jenna, I've got you. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Jenna mumbled, blinking as she held onto Sheba for support. "Isaac... what happened to Isaac...?"

"Alex took him." The voice of Piers behind her made Sheba jump slightly, but she felt an immediate warmth inside her at knowing one of her other companions was still around. But it was gone quickly as she looked ahead to see that *Alex* had not left the war-torn plaza. In fact, he had not moved at all, still smiling that unnerving smile.

"Greetings," he called out brightly, taking a few steps forward. "Forgive me. I am sorry that we could not meet under more relaxed circumstances, but these are such trying times and desperate measures must be taken. But now that we have gotten rid of the ruffians, I was hoping I could have some semblance of a discussion with all of you."

"Save whatever you wish to say," Piers replied coldly, brandishing his Levatine. "We have no interest in it. Where has Alex taken Isaac?"

The smile slowly faded, replaced by an empty, yet calculating look. "Believe me, my very rude Lemurian, I wish that I knew. It would appear our mutual friend has gone somewhere beyond my gaze. But that is of no matter right now. Those two obviously have much to discuss in private.

My business is with all of you. I ask that you do not fight me... at least, not just yet."

"Give us one good reason not to," Jenna growled suddenly, moving away from Sheba to unsheathe her Phaeton's Blade.

"There are many reasons," *Alex* replied coolly. "But the most pertinent to you, my dear Jenna, is no doubt your dear brother."

Jenna felt her breath catch in her throat as she quickly lowered her blade. "Felix? What... where is he? What have you done to him?!"

"Something that a lowly traitor like your brother does not deserve, to be certain," *Alex* remarked. "For what it is worth, he joined my order under the pretense that no harm would ever befall you all, especially you, his dear sister. Honorable intentions from a worthless snake in the grass, I suppose."

"*Shut up!*" Jenna screamed, even alarming *Alex* with her sudden outburst. "Don't you *dare* talk about him like that. Now stop dodging my question and tell me where the hell he is right now!"

Alex was silent for a few moments. "I had forgotten how emotionally driven human beings can be. This will prove interesting. Very well, my dear. I will grant your request."

He drew his attention away from them for a moment as he looked up to the sky and his body was slowly surrounded by a black aura. "Come forth, Felix..." he spoke aloud. "Show them your newfound enlightenment."

In moments, Felix began to walk forward seemingly out of the night itself and into the light of the fires still burning bright in the ruined plaza of Vale. Somehow, upon hearing

Alex's words, the horrible truth had dawned on Jenna before she had even seen him, but that did not adequately prepare her for the sight of his eyes as he neared. "W-what... what have you done to him?" Her voice was a horrified whisper.

Alex looked back at Felix, studying him. "Something I should have arranged to be done a long time ago. Had I been more perceptive, I would have realized that, as a human, he would never so willingly cast aside his... loved ones. Perhaps my judgment was clouded by the fact that he so readily abandoned you when you needed him most." Alex looked back at Jenna, studying her facial expressions with interest as they grew even angrier at his remark. "Yes, in case you were wondering, all who fall under my curse not only share link with my own mind, allowing myself an easy way to control them, it also allows me to easily access their thoughts and memories, not too unlike the abilities of your Jupiter Adept friend. Oh. My apologies. I suppose calling her a 'friend' at this point would be quite a stretch, would it not?"

Violently shaking, Jenna clenched her fists and stared down the man in blue, glaring into his eyes as if looking into the very presence that inhabited the familiar form of Alex. "Let him go. *Now.*"

"You are in no position to make demands. Besides which, freeing him is now impossible. The curse cannot be lifted by any means you possess. I would have to remove it myself, and if I may be so blunt, that is never going to happen. In case you need it made clearer to you, my dear, your brother is dead."

A feeling of sickness overwhelmed Jenna, a sickness independent of the fever that she had been trying to ignore

for so long. Her head throbbed painfully and she felt no desire to withstand it.

"Don't listen to him, Jenna," Sheba verbalized through her own sadness to her friend. "He's lying. You know that."

"You... you can't..." Jenna tried to speak through her quivering rage, trying to verbalize how wrong all of this was, as she had when that horrible creature had nearly killed them all. Only somehow, this was a far worse hopelessness. "You can't do this..."

"What an interesting statement. I 'can't'... as if some greater force were at work to impede all that I do. Very interesting. But... back to the matter at hand. I am curious as to why you carry on in such a way. It would not be the first time you thought your brother dead, nor would it be the first time he has left you."

"What the hell would you know about it?!" Jenna shouted suddenly, receiving no answer from *Alex*. "Well? Answer me! You don't know anything about him! He's *my* brother! You're... you're just a..."

"A monster? A demon? Yes, I have heard those statements many times. But as for your assertion that I know nothing of him, that is quite untrue. As I said, I have looked into your brother's mind. Specifically, I have seen what a low opinion he had of you. I believe one particular thought of his was how little patience he had for your constant crying when your mother and father perished, and how you would ask him to hold you whenever you felt overwhelmed by sadness and grief."

A heavy silence filled the air.

"*That* is what I 'know about it'," Alex replied. "I have also seen the memory of the day he left you. The day you tried to stand in his way and he forced you aside. Ah, that is a prominent thought in his mind, indeed. In many ways, it was simply a physical manifestation of the imagery building in his mind for so long. You were but an obstacle for him to overcome, Jenna, just as you are now as you stand in the way of our progress. I suppose it would not be entirely inaccurate to say that even a bond as supposedly strong as that between 'family' is so easily broken, even without the utilization of a power such as my curse. And please, do not believe me to be mocking you. Far from it. I am merely... an interested observer."

Jenna looked away from her tormentor back to her brother's face, empty and dead. What little hope Isaac had filled with her with was now, like him, long gone. As she stared at Felix, foolishly wishing that his eyes would slowly change back to their warm and familiar brown, she remembered a time in which she had been happiest as a child. She could not even remember the context, or what she had been doing, but it was a brief happy image of herself, her brother, Isaac, and Garet. Then it was gone, and she was brought back to the cold reality.

Everyone was leaving her again. Everyone always seemed to be leaving in some way. Isaac was gone. Garet was dead. Her parents were dead. And now Felix was gone again. For a long time following the deaths of those she loved, Jenna had thought it was all related to outside circumstances. That things just happened, and sometimes you were unlucky. But now her mind was telling her something even more horrifying, that the constant and terrible occurrences of losing those she loved was not random or unlucky at all.

It was her. It was just her. Whatever it was about her that perpetuated so much repeated loss and sadness, she did not know, but it all made sense when she thought of it in that way. Everything seemed to become clear. It was her. Everyone had left *her*. And soon she would be all alone again, just like always. Alone. It hurt. Her head hurt. Everything hurt.

Her Phaeton's Blade clanged to the ground as she fell to her knees, her composure crumbling at last. "Why?" She choked out through a sob. "*Why?*"

Immediately, Sheba knelt down and wrapped her arms around her friend. "Jenna..." She whispered. "Calm down... please. Don't let him do this to you. I'm here... I'm here..."

Jenna, still crying, looked up to see Sheba's worried and saddened face looking back at her through her tear-filled vision. Seeing the worry, the care, the sheer friendship in Sheba's eyes almost seemed... confusing.

Sheba's still here, she thought. Sheba never left. Not once. Not even now, when I have given her so many reasons to. She's still here. Still here.

"Sheba...?" Jenna asked, her voice small, as if fearful she would disappear if she blinked.

"It's going to be okay," Sheba whispered again. "Do you hear me? Everything will be okay."

"Yet another lie," Alex whispered. "So many statements without adequate evidence or even adequate certainty. Humans are nothing if not endlessly deceitful."

But his words barely registered in Jenna's mind. "Sheba," she said softly, another tear running down her face before she

wiped it away. "I... hear you. Thank you..." Leaning forward, she briefly kissed Sheba on the cheek, where she had struck her.

Jenna then gently pushed Sheba back as she picked herself up once more, picking up the Phaeton's Blade. "It's not going to work," she said to *Alex*, deceptively calm as she smiled coldly at him. She still felt angry, more angry than she had ever felt in her entire life. But in her mind, she saw the look in her best friend's eyes again and again, and it drove the thirst for revenge away in favor of a drive to ensure that Sheba's hopes were not misplaced. Once again things began to clear for her, and this time, the conclusion was not so hopeless. "Everything you said... you were lying. And I know it now. Like I said, you don't know him. I do. He's my brother. You're nothing. Not even a 'monster'. Just another obstacle to us."

Alex let out a sigh. "Damned creatures, you humans... you find ways to intrigue me yet. As a reward, I will offer you the truth. Indeed, I lied to you. I was hoping you would lose complete control and attack me, so that you would then join your brother when I unleashed my curse upon you. You see, clear-minded, powerful individuals can withstand it, unless they are either put into extreme pain, or, theoretically, lose all sense of control. But you and your... friendship, it would seem, have disrupted that plan."

"Much apologies if we disappointed you," Sheba replied coolly. "I could hear it in your voice when you were lying. Didn't need to read your mind for that. But everything you say now... it's the truth. You tried to grind her down, make her suffer for a theory. For a stupid plan. You're sickening. Lower than dirt."

"I assume your failed experiment is over," Piers spoke at last, rage burning inside of him at all he had witnessed, raising his sword.

"Quite over."

Felix unsheathed his Gaia Blade suddenly, immediately stepping forward and in front of *Alex* like a shield.

Realizing the intent behind the directed action, Piers clenched the hilt of his Levatine so hard it hurt. "You spineless coward..."

"I simply have more pressing matters at hand than you three. I admit, I intended to make my offer to you and the Jupiter Adept after taking Jenna to join me willingly. But now I realize how foolish I was to even consider it. Every age has historically had its unenlightened followers, willing to die for hopeless causes in an attempt to impede progress and a greater future. Mark my words, you will prove to be no different than the myriad martyrs who have fallen throughout time. Felix, kill them all."

With that, *Alex* turned and began to sprint into the night. The three Adepts behind him made to go after him, but Felix raised a palm in their direction, issuing forth no attack, but keeping them at bay in the service of his new master.

The blue beams of light from Alex's teleportation faded from Isaac's view, and he immediately stood up, whirling around and aiming his sword at Alex's chest. Alex unsheathed his own sword and backed away in a defensive stance.

Isaac lowered his sword as he saw Alex did not plan to attack just yet, and Alex did the same. Looking around, Isaac quickly realized where he was. It was a place, an island, that

he had been to numerous times before. It was unknown to most, virtually off any known map of Weyard. To his left was innumerable trees of a forest, and to his right, the blue expanse of the Karagol Sea, although it looked black in the dark night. In the days when he had first come to this place, the only thing that towered above the tall trees was the large mountain in the center of island. But now the mountain seemed to have split in half to allow for a gigantic black stone structure to rise from deep within the island itself, stretching high into the air.

It was the fifth lighthouse. The lighthouse of darkness. And it had arisen from its resting place within the feared and infamous Crossbone Isle.

Isaac looked away from the towering structure and back at Alex. "So what now, Alex? If this was meant to be some kind of trap, the others would be here to give you all the best chance of bringing me down, or at least taking the star. Why here, and away from the others?"

"You seem remarkably calm, given what has just transpired," Alex remarked, studying Isaac with interest.

"Losing my temper will aid nothing," Isaac replied. "On top of which, they can take care of themselves. Dodonpa's pet was a particularly special case which forced my hand, and only because it had an unfair advantage. But I know that the conversion of the lighthouses is meant to help gain the Dark Alchemists more power in some way. To diminish the effects of Alchemy's release. I'm sure the... other you would love to have me believe he is already all powerful, but we both know that isn't true. Now how about answering my question?"

"Let's just say I have proven my worth to the other me," Alex said with a tone of distaste at the mention of his twin. "As such, he has given me this chance to accomplish what I asked of him. To at long last put an end to our long-awaited conflict."

"You needed his permission to make this happen? How unlike you, Alex."

"Amusing," Alex replied coolly. "Your old friend Gareth said something very similar, albeit in a much more... crude manner. It would anger him greatly to know that the two of you are very similar."

Isaac ignored a certain feeling deep down in his gut at the mention of Gareth. "So you pulled the same trick on him, then?"

"I had to," Alex replied with a hint of smugness. "My counterpart would love for you to believe otherwise, but while his Psynergy may be strong, even he does not know a few tricks, namely my teleportation. I understand he used his teleportation to take Felix from you and the others. I am sure you noticed it took him noticeably longer to teleport Felix away than it would have been for me?"

"Let me guess, you only taught him enough of that ability for him to wield it fairly ineptly compared to you."

"I always need to make sure I have at least one advantage on my side."

"Clever. So then where does that leave you? You're clearly working against him... I presume to take all the power for yourself?"

"My goals are far more noble than that of a simple rise to absolute power."

"Somehow, I doubt that."

"Whatever you think of me and my aspirations is irrelevant," Alex said. "We both know I did not bring you here so we could debate my ethics."

"I understand that. But a brawl doesn't sound like your style either."

"Indeed. There does not have to be a fight between the two of us at all. Avoiding such an unnecessary outcome would take one simple thing on your part."

"Relinquishing my hold on Alchemy."

"As I understand it, it is possible, and liable to be extremely painful and challenging for the one whose body must house the entirety of Alchemy's power in such a direct and quick way, but I am more than willing to take on that responsibility. I would ask you to do so, but we both already know what your answer is going to be. I just wanted to make sure you knew that the choice was always yours to make, not mine."

Isaac could not help but give a sardonic laugh. "And therein lies the tragic irony. I would love nothing more than to give this up. I've spent the last six years hating this burden that I never wanted or asked for, unlike you. Were it anyone else... *anyone else*, I'd jump at the opportunity. But the thought of *you* running around with all of Alchemy's power in your hands is... less than comforting, Alex. The one person in this whole world who would even ask this of me is the one person I can't trust to give it to."

"So you say, Isaac. But I am not sure that is the entire reason."

"Oh?"

"I am not. Call me too philosophical for my own good, but I believe we are all compelled to follow certain paths in life by something other than our own will and selfish desires. Obviously, greater powers exist in this world, such as the Wise One. But I refer to powers even beyond something like the Wise One. Forces which push and propel all actions, govern all that occurs. And as it pertains to you and I, I believe this fight was destined to occur. Surely you cannot think that everything leading up to this was pure chance? The rise of the Golden Sun being the beginning of all of this, the Wise One's interference, that there would be two Dark Alchemists who awaited their rebirths into this world, calling out to us..."

Alex smiled and sheathed his sword. He took a deep breath, exhaled, and then blue rings of overflowing Psynergy began to surround his body. Slowly, his feet left the ground and he began to rise higher and higher into the air, his arms spread out in adulation of the moment he had at long last constructed. "We are fated to clash, Isaac. This was all meant to be. I do not know about you, but I consider that rather intriguing and, pardon the pun, elevating. I have waited far too long for this..."

Isaac said nothing, simply sheathing his Sol Blade as well before shutting his eyes. Golden rings of Psynergy soon began to radiate from his body as well.

Powerful winds kicked up, shaking the leaves of the trees all over the island. The island itself began to rumble and quake. Small tornadoes of pure sand kicked up all over the island

from the whirling winds. Waves crashed against the shore as the surrounding sea within a mile radius began to churn and bubble from the combined, overflowing energies. And deep within the mountain and under the island itself, where the impossibly long staircase of Crossbone Isle had led many unfortunate sailors and pirates to their doom, the ever-burning torches that lit the way suddenly flared up into huge infernos, frightening what few critters still resided in the dark tunnels below.

Isaac opened his eyes, and assumed a fighting stance without his sword, indicating that only his powers would aid him.

Alex looked down at him and smiled, doing the same. "Let us see who fate smiles upon, Isaac."

At long last, the battle of the Alchemists was ready to begin.

Edited: 4/30/2016

Disclaimer: Stuff.

Well, I didn't lie. I got this up in less than a year. More like half a year, which means I kept my word. :P So yeah, this chapter will probably be even harder to read than the last one, being packed full of exposition. At least fight scenes go somewhere. I really tried to make the central exposition dump the... well, central part of the story, so that there was enough somewhat intriguing things going on before and after that. Also, I figured fans of Golden Sun probably wouldn't mind long exposition. *cough*Kraden*cough*

On another note, if it seems like I'm putting poor Jenna through the ringer, it's only because I am. Things always have to get worse before they get better. That's why she'll

need Sheba. I really enjoyed writing the Sheba and Jenna friendship stuff, as well as the strain that gets put on it when Sheba's lie comes to light. Of all the characters, I always thought their friendship in the games shined through the most, so I made it a pretty big part of their characters.

Originally, Isaac's father was going to play a somewhat integral role in this part of the story, but I cut him out because the chapter was getting too long and the plot points were getting way too complicated as it was. It's probably apparent that I've reworked a few things here and there in the seven years this story has been up. Champa, for instance, was always going to be a big upcoming battle, but now I've added more of a plot reason for the characters to be so focused on it. In doing so, I've probably created another plot hole that I've missed, but hey, that's the glory of unprofessional online publishing of writing, eh?

On a final note, I originally called the Isaac and Alex alter egos "Shadow Alex" and "Shadow Isaac", which I thought was too cheesy even for this story. However, if anyone thinks that's better or easier to read than the italics of the names, I can change that. The way I'm approaching their identities now is that they basically have no real names, as they have forgotten their original ones.

Okay, now I'm done. Extra long chapter deserves extra long personal analysis, I say. Thanks for reading, everyone who does. Just knowing someone is reading keeps me going. Thanks again.

Next time: Battles, battles, and the biggest event of this story so far. Seriously.

Edit (3/3/2015): Much thanks to Guest for pointing out some errors I made in grammar and typos. I'm a stickler for these

kinds of things, and while they're now corrected, I feel it's important to acknowledge when you've messed up and had some help fixing things up, so thank you again.

***Chapter 6*: Chapter 6**

Author's Note: I do not own this property.

It's back by nobody's demand! Yeah, I'm going to keep this short and just mention that chapters 1, 2, and 5 have all received largely minor edits for the sake of continuity, and due to better ideas that have come about recently as opposed to the terrible ones I had before. The motivations of the Kalay soldiers fighting for Lunpa are now explained, the history of Vale is slightly tweaked, there is some touched up dialogue, and Isaac's father is now dead. Yeah, there really wasn't a reason to keep poor Kyle around now that he's been written out indefinitely, so he has been laid to rest with Dora. Meanwhile, Aaron is looking around, wondering if the author forgot about him. (I haven't.) You may be thinking, "Those are minor?!" Yes, because nothing has really changed about the story. I've just made the overall lore more consistent. It's not perfect by any means, but nothing ever is.

And... that's about it. I didn't want to say anything at the end because if I manage to make anyone feel the slightest bit of emotion by the end of this chapter, I don't want to ruin it with my dumb self-reflections. I put a LOT of work into this chapter, rewriting so many things, going back and quadruple checking bits of dialogue and descriptions, and heck, I still probably have some errors in here that I won't catch until my fiftieth glance (It doesn't likely, but trust me, it's happened before). And to you, reader, I say... I hope you enjoy it.

The Wrath of Dark Alchemy

Rebellion: The Dying Light In The Darkness

A deep, swirling, everlasting blackness. No thought. No sound. But a voice. Constant. Neverending. Loud. Soft. Everywhere. Nowhere.

Tears. Her tears. His tears. Rain.

A memory? No. A dream. A wish. A lie.

A light? Faint. Almost nonexistent. Almost. Still there. In the corner of the eye. Turn to look.

Too late. Far too late. It is gone.

Gone. But not forgotten.

Don't follow me.

Gone. And forgotten.

Don't follow me.

Bright flashes of white light periodically illuminated the entirety of Crossbone Isle, making it seem as though it were the brightest day every few seconds. Isaac and Alex were trading blasts of pure Psynesergetic energy back and forth, their bodies glowing with golden and blue light respectively.

Isaac dodged a blast which struck the land to his left, turning his head towards the sea to avoid vision impairment from the sand. In the same movement, he aimed both palms down to the earth beneath him, and a circular chunk of land he stood upon suddenly separated itself from the earth and began to rise up into the air, sand falling from it back down to the beach below. Within moments, he was level with Alex, who wasted no time in sending another blast his way as

Isaac began to fly in his direction, controlling the rocky formation beneath him with his power over earth.

Isaac swerved himself to the right to avoid the blast, and then to the left to avoid another. Then, in one fluid motion, Isaac answered with his own blast and then performed a back flip with the aid of the wind as the small land mass was sent flying towards Alex as well. With a blast of wind to the earth, Isaac slowed his descent, landing on his feet again.

Alex, having dodged the first blast was caught off-guard, eyes widening in surprise at the maneuver as he raised both hands and reduced the mass of earth to a cloud of dust with a single blast, the forward momentum of the earthen formation sending the dust into his eyes. With a hiss of irritation, Alex prepared to move himself out of the cloud, but then felt something seize his ankle from far below and begin to pull him back down to land where his opponent waited.

Isaac, his body swirling with purple and yellow particles, concentrated hard and spoke in a whisper, "*Growth Bolt.*"

At once, the glowing vine that had grabbed Alex began to produce an electrical discharge, making Alex yell in pain. His concentration momentarily shattered, Alex began to descend until he too finally touched down upon the island, the vine releasing him as the spell wore quickly summoned the energies of Venus, his body and mind now far more comfortable with his natural element. *There's no time to mess around with him... I need to end this quick.*

Raising both his hands in Alex's direction, Isaac let out a yell of exertion, and the ground between Isaac and Alex cracked and split all over before an explosion of energy sounded,

and hundreds of bits and chunks of earthen rock flew forward towards Alex.

Alex's teeth clenched, forcing screams of pain down as he felt trickles of blood running down his face from the sharper bits of rock that had managed to strike his face before he had shielded it with his arms. The rocks continued to pelt him all over, and he struggled to concentrate through the pain, only for his focus to be broken once more by the feeling of the rocks striking his back and the backs of his head and legs, forcing him to take a knee from the unexpected burst of pain. Through the painful storm of rock and dirt, Alex's squinted, half-shielded eyes discerned Isaac with his hands in the air and glowing with Psynergy, deep in concentration himself. Isaac was controlling the movement of every piece of rock, effectively trapping Alex in a tornado of flying earth.

Dark memories of being trapped by the earth itself gave rise to a cold rage deep down within Alex, and with immense concentration, he forced his mind to focus the pain and turn it outward into power. With a scream of savagery, Alex expelled a powerful Psynergetic blast from his entire body that reduced the chunks of earth to nothing but dust and knocked Isaac off his feet due to his proximity to the blast.

Wasting no time, Isaac forced himself up and rocketed forward from the ground, delivering a punch tinged with Mars energy into Alex's chest. He could not let Alex rest for too long if he hoped to stop him long enough for Isaac to get away from this battle and back to his friends.

Isaac performed a spinning maneuver out of the way of Alex's retaliating punch and two fists of fire struck Alex across the face in quick succession, staggering him. Alex tried to use another blast of Psynergy, only for another vine

to immediately wrap itself around his wrist, holding his hand back and throwing him off-balance. Using the momentary distraction to his advantage, Isaac delivered multiple punches to Alex's chest and face, each tinged with a different elemental energy. Just as the vine spell wore off, Isaac quickly harnessed the power of the Djinni Flint into his fist, and slammed it into Alex's chest, sending him flying into the island's forest, his body colliding painfully with a tree in his path. Alex slid down the trunk to the ground in a sitting position, clutching his chest as he coughed up blood, feeling as though a troll had just slammed its club into his chest multiple times.

"Enough." Alex looked up, his body shaking with pain and a growing frustration, to see Isaac standing before him with his left palm facing Alex. After a few moments of apparent consideration, Isaac lowered his hand, no look of triumph on his face. He did not intend to kill his enemy, not out of foolish kindness or some crisis of morality, but because he knew Alex, dangerous as he was, was still a useful enemy to utilize against the far greater threat of the Dark Alchemists.

"This is pointless, Alex. Just stop and think for a moment how futile all of this is. I won't ever surrender my half of Alchemy to you, so the only possible option would be to kill me, and then you lose again. Whatever you're hoping to accomplish with this fight just isn't going to happen. No matter what happens, you're going to lose."

Alex silently discerned Isaac for a moment, and Isaac felt uneasy despite himself at the blank, cold stare. Alex looked down, seemingly in deep thought, before he immediately looked up and sent a blast at Isaac using only his mind. Isaac braced himself in the split-second that he had, and the blast failed to knock him down, only sending him skidding along the ground. But the momentary distraction was all

Alex had needed. He shut his eyes, and felt much of his previous pain depart his body after only seconds of mental concentration, the healing energy that reinvigorated him making its presence known in a dazzling glow of white light all over his form. His cuts faded, though the blood remained upon his face. It was an altogether unsettling image.

Isaac sighed and gave a slight shake of his head. It was a quick, punishing action that communicated ashamed disapproval, which in turn only caused the intense, burning fury within Alex to grow even stronger. "Damn it, Alex, just stop and listen to me. It's not too late to do what you damn well know you should. You have the knowledge we need to find and ambush the Dark Alchemists while they are not yet at full strength. And then, if you absolutely must settle this with me, then we can have it out after we get rid of the Dark Alchemists. You have my word."

"And be overcome by you and your allies, with you free of all distraction...?" Alex's blank face slowly broke into a smirk and he spat in Isaac's direction. "Nice try." His eyes flashed again, almost too quick to see, but it was enough for Isaac.

"Freeze Prism!"

"Granite!" Isaac's Djinn immediately formed its powerful shield around him just as the ice formations smashed down upon it, Isaac flinching as a few managed to pierce the shield and strike him, but the damage was far less than it would have been otherwise.

"Freeze Prism!"

Isaac leapt out of the way as the shield faded completely and took off at a run, the icy blasts pursuing him without relent. Isaac ran directly towards a tree and leapt forward, planting both his feet against it just long enough to summon

up the powers of Jupiter, and he then blasted away from it with the wind once more, headed right for Alex. The collision was punishing for both, but more so for Alex who was smashed into the ground. Isaac was sent rolling away from the force of his attack, but he wasted no time in capitalizing. *"Ramses!"*

The ancient deity he had summoned against Toadonpa rose again, and Alex was sent sliding backwards as the gigantic fist struck him with an explosion of energy sparks, managing to keep himself from falling to the ground. Isaac took off at a run towards Alex, powering up and throwing another punch of fire.

But Alex unexpectedly caught the punch in one hand shimmering with Mercury energy while still looking at the ground, the recoil pushing him further back a few feet, but largely leaving him unharmed. Isaac threw another punch, but it too was caught. Alex slowly looked up, his eyes livid. The ground began to shake as the two Alchemists' bodies began to overflow with Psynergy, both pushing against the other more with the power of their minds than their physical strengths.

Alex's eyes then flashed a blinding lavender, and the strength of his mind broke right through Isaac's mental defenses in a second. Isaac let out a scream of pain as lightning crackled all over his form, and his eyes flashed yellow as he tried to counter Alex's new offensive with the opposing element. Two vines sprouted from the ground behind Alex and immediately wrapped themselves around his throat, pulling backwards as Alex choked out a strangled breath. The vines tightened with incredible force and Alex could see his vision growing hazier by the second.

Alex suddenly released Isaac's hands and aimed his own at Isaac's chest, sending him staggering backwards with blasts of pure electricity. In the next second, the electricity surrounding his form converted into fire for only a moment, burning away the vines around his neck. Alex did not waste a second in sending another electrical current into Isaac.

Jupiter Psynergy was significantly less damaging to Isaac than it used to be, but the reaction of the opposing elements of Jupiter and Venus still existed. It was such a bizarre sensation, Isaac thought, to feel various parts of his very soul react to the damaging energy. Part of his being rejected it as a body would try to reject a virus, while another part almost welcomed its sibling energy.

"I have not cheated death to leave this island empty-handed," Alex hissed, blasting Isaac with another powerful blast of Jupiter Psynergy, forcing the wounded Alchemist to take a knee in growing exhaustion from the powerful blasts. "Not even you can withstand true pain for too long, Isaac. If my words will not convince you, then I will subject you to tortures unimaginable for as long as it takes until you succumb. And mark my words, you *will* succumb, pathetically unworthy as you are of Alchemy's strength." Another blast of lightning.

"*Granite!*" The golden shield surrounded Isaac again, sparing him from the full power of the lightning. Isaac then raised his hand as the shield began to fade away and screamed, "*Ragnarok!*"

Alex reacted quickly, blue energy surrounding his form, and he teleported away just as the gigantic sword construct struck the ground where he had been a second ago. Isaac barely had time to look about before Alex delivered an icy punch to his face immediately after reappearing once more.

Alex raised both hands up, and a powerful blast sent Isaac flying backwards and through the shores of the Karagol Sea, the water slowing his momentum only somewhat as his body was pushed deeper and deeper into the sea, at least several yards away from land.

Freezing water filled his lungs as he struggled to the surface, dimly aware of a faint roaring sound coming from somewhere in the water. As he broke the surface, Isaac's eyes widened at the sight he beheld and he immediately expelled a powerful blast from his hands aimed down at the seafloor. Isaac flew upwards out of the water and allowed himself to fall down and land on his feet upon a thick sheet of ice as a blue wave of energy continued to freeze the waters behind him.

The already cool wind against his drenched form was made worse by the sudden influx of coldness that would not be out of place in the land of Prox. Isaac called upon the energy of Mars within him to warm his body, and then called forth the energies of Mercury to withstand the freezing.

Once the cold was bearable, Isaac began to look around in awe at the small frozen wasteland that had suddenly taken form around Crossbone Isle, stretching out at least a mile in diameter from the island. A few snowflakes were even beginning to fall to the ice due to the rapid change in temperature. Isaac looked forward once more, and saw Alex calmly walking towards him along the ice, completely balanced and at ease in this new environment.

Impressed, Isaac? Alex's voice echoed in Isaac's mind as energy radiated from his form once again. *I thought you might be. Judging by the energy I sense from you, it seems that in your training you devoted an equal measure of focus to all four elemental energies. The results are a plethora of*

new abilities and Psynesergetic spells... but at the cost of mastery. Your tactics using the earth itself were clever, but simple in comparison to what you are truly capable of.

I have dabbled with Mars and Venus as well... just enough to control them. But the better part of my study was devoted to Mercury and Jupiter. Jupiter... for the useful abilities that come with the mind and testing its malleability. And Mercury... to further my natural and most powerful element. The results are what you see here... absolute mastery of water.

Alex raised his hands to the sky as his body began to generate even more power, and Isaac watched as the ice beneath his feet began to rise, elevating him slowly into the air as it took form into a gigantic pillar at least twenty feet tall and ten feet thick. Just as Isaac was considering blasting Alex's pillar in half with as much power as he could, another pillar suddenly began to take form in front of it. Within seconds, more and more began to take form all around Isaac, and he quickly leapt upon one as it carried him into the air, lest he be trapped in a frozen maze of Alex's own devising, and with Alex having the higher ground. As the ice structure beneath him brought him level with the rest, Alex simply smiled.

Now you will know what it is to be trapped, Isaac. Know this... nothing I do to you today will ever amount to even a fraction of the pain I have endured... but I will do my best to make you understand what it was like...

The soldiers of darkness were moving quickly.

Isaac stood at the borders of Vault and patiently watched as the cursed men of Lunpa he had brought with him swept

through the small village much like they had done in Vale. As if capable of sensing that there existed no one person in Vault that could potentially handle all of them at once in a straight fight, the thieves let out howls and cackles as they flung torches upon roofs, kicked open doors that led to innumerable innocents, and brought down the defense force of Vault, refraining from killing them per the Dark Alchemist's orders.

It was a bizarre sight for the defeated soldiery of Vault to see when the attack suddenly ceased, and each and every Lunpa brigand halted their movements, marched to the center of the village to surround them all, and then stood perfectly still, looking more like effigies of the town's tormenters than the men themselves. Their faces were blank, exhibiting none of the amusement they had shown up until now. All was silent save for the crackling fires, the exhausted heavy breathing of Vault's kneeling soldiers as they waited for their inevitable execution, and the fading screams of the retreating villagers who had desperately fled the town with no destination in mind.

The small crowd of brigands parted somewhat to allow *Isaac* to approach the frightened soldiers, all of whom could only stare into the pits of blackness that were his eyes. After a few moments of preparation that would help him to ensnare all of the men in one fell swoop, *Isaac* finally spoke, "*Dark Curse.*"

The screams were loud and almost chaotic with how they overlapped with one another. The simultaneous agony lasted ten seconds. *Isaac* barely acknowledged them as they began to rise, turning around and raising both his hands to the sky as he shut his eyes and prepared himself once more. Black rings of energy surrounded his form, and then he spoke once more into the cold night.

"Dark Restoration."

Meanwhile, Feizhi stood within the forests bordering the city of Kalay just as she had previously, now flanked by the Veiled Sentry sans the Dark Murder. Rings of Psynergy surrounded her as she sought out a specific energy signature within the city. In seconds, she ceased and turned towards the creatures behind her.

"We depart. The star shall not be found here. His desired treasure is our highest priority. We shall return for the warrior once the star and the traitor have been reclaimed."

At once, she began to sprint away from the city, requiring none of the Veiled Sentry's tracking abilities to seek out her prey. Though confused, the Sentry followed after her, compelled to respect the commands of those tinged with the darkness that they gathered to like worshipers.

At the same time, *A/*ex finally ceased his flight from Vale, knowing he was too far away now to be pursued. Alone at last, he allowed himself a moment of laughter, a moment to frolic in the world of his mind, a vision of a coming future that he knew was inevitable. Already the elements were warring with one another, and the shroud had yet to even be awakened. Not even he had predicted that his victory would be this easy.

His laughter stopped suddenly as his body seemed to remember and respond to the exertion of running for so long. Forced to take a breath, he drew it in an instant, now dimly aware of the quick beating of his heart, the perspiration on his brow, and the increased coolness of the wind upon his brow as a result. *A/*ex shivered violently, not from the wind, but from an unforgiving rage that was

growing within him by the second, far colder than even the night winds of a world tinged with growing elemental chaos.

The rage brought forth another vision to his mind to replace what he had seen before. A bleak and sorrowful world of light. A world wherein the shadow he cast without consent was more natural than his very existence. A world that he would not and could not permit to exist.

An explosion of energies from somewhere he could not identify with his senses caught his attention immediately, and he knew exactly what, or who, was producing the explosion. A blanket of cold seemed to envelop the world for only a split second as the power of his identical counterpart in particular was brought out in full.

Now devoid of joy, arrogant amusement, and even bottomless rage, *Alex* stood absolutely alone in the black forest and lowered his eyes to the ground, waiting for his body to stop shivering.

Brutally frigid winds stung the skin as an endless snowfall helped to form a white blanket of cold over the lands of Imil. The townspeople fled into their houses to escape nature's wrath. All but a single woman who was not only outside, showing little to no reaction to the winds and the snow, but was walking away from the safety of the town and into the wasteland of ice, drawn out by the conflict she felt emanating from somewhere far to the south.

The two distinct energy signatures she could feel were immensely powerful and frightening... and yet strangely comforting to her in their familiarity. After years of an almost solitary life spent living in the cold, confined to the land of Imil to avoid the terrible conflicts all across Angara, and

right on Imil's doorstep once Bilibin had become involved, the returning memories brought to her a powerful warmth.

A sudden chill that could be felt even through the raging winds of the snow storm caught her off-guard, and she took a few steps back, shielding her face from it. When it had faded, she looked up and into the white, dreary distance, her eyes telling the story of the confusing tempest within her soul.

"...Alex."

Hama shivered violently, tightening her mauve cloak around herself as the nightly winds of the feared Lamakan Desert assailed her. The Lamakan naturally became colder in the night, but Hama discerned that these winds were far more unforgivingly freezing than they had ever been in years past. *Alex. Incredible. For all of his arrogance, his power truly is something to behold.*

A strange clicking sound in the distance alerted her senses from the distant battle of Alchemists, and she quickly cast Reveal, illuminating her to the surrounding environment and spotting a lurking Ant Lion several feet away. With a blast of Plasma Psynergy, she sent it scuttling further away into the night. She watched for a few more seconds as if waiting for it to come back before pressing onward. Listening to the guttural growls of Orcs somewhere in the distance, she felt slightly more uneasy than before as she made her way into a shaded area of the desert where rocky walls of stone surrounded her road.

She was not frightened of the beasts that resided in the Lamakan. At least, not the beasts themselves, but rather what they represented in her mind. It had been a very long

time since she had truly journeyed alone, and the prospect just made everything, from the task that lay ahead to the desert itself, that much more daunting. The thought of failing now, especially from a monster's fatal surprise attack that would end with her picked-over bones eventually being buried in the sands of the Lamakan, forgotten and forever hidden from those she loved, was too disgraceful to bear.

Hama had always felt disgusted with herself for even thinking it, but the journeys granted to her by the Dark Alchemists had always been embarked upon with the silent understanding that the forces she now wished to dispel from this world were guarding her. Evil though those mysterious figures may have been, she had found solace in the fact that a power beyond human comprehension was aiding her as she walked the more hostile areas of Weyard. And now, not only was she alone and actively opposing such a power, but she did not even have the comfort of knowing that she would soon return to her beloved by the journey's end.

Now, with no reunion to look forward to with certainty, Hama could not help but look back and indulge in her memories of the happiness they had shared in recent years past. However, the joy she usually attained from those memories now felt hollow as her mind turned to her current goal, and more specifically, the man she was going to have to meet in due time. The man who served as a constant reminder of the existence of people who, when even this darkness passed, would continue to prefer a reality where she and those like her did not exist.

In the past, it had been enough to make her question her choice to protect a people that in one breath championed values such as unity and the preservation of life, and in the next preached the necessity of division and the just cause of war. It had been then that the shadows had found her. It

seemed almost a natural ability that they possessed, to find the rejected and the empty in their darkest moments, and force them to face that darkness, all the while assailing their victims with words and cold logic that convinced them that there could be no recourse from their inner turmoil and pain. And once the mind grew to accept their words, there could be no turning back.

Unless, as Hama had discovered, something stronger than mere words pierced the veil they created around one's very soul. And for her, that something had been those most dear to her. The woman who had defied fate itself to share in her love. Her brother who had assuaged her guilt and kept her in the light. And the man in the form of the wolf, whose final mournful howl had communicated hope rather than despair. A hope for the world and humankind, even for those who had sought to destroy him, and all who were categorized as the abnormal and the unnatural.

As she came to a fork in the rocky terrain, fast moving footsteps from behind were immediately discerned by Hama's keen senses. Swiftly, she slipped her small concealed blades out from her sleeves, gripping the hilts with her hands and whirling around in a defensive stance, surprised to see a sword-wielding warrior in armor of a purple hue, assuming a shaky stance of his own and keeping several feet away from her. More footsteps echoed through the pass as two more warriors, one in green armor and the other in black, emerged from hiding spots in the other two paths. They had her surrounded.

"What business do you have in these lands?" The green warrior spoke, brandishing his Claymore, inwardly perturbed that the woman showed not an ounce of fear at the action. "Answer."

"I am passing through the Lamakan to find the remaining warriors of Xian at Alpine Crossing. I have business with their leader." Hama's eyes darted all around, instantly analytical of the three men's respective demeanors. Her blades were lowered and concealed again after she silently determined that they did not mean her harm.

"A spy of Dodonpa, no doubt," the man in purple said in an excited manner, as if desperate to find a reason to attack, despite his sword practically shaking in his grasp.

The black warrior scoffed. "Galahad, get a grip, and think things through a little more before you say them. Dodonpa? Sending one woman into the Lamakan Desert? Giving a woman such an important task at all instead of just throwing her to his dogs as that disgusting man is wont to do?"

"Yes, because this is clearly an innocent traveler," the affronted Galahad shot back before turning back to Hama. "She wields those weapons like an assassin. I imagine this 'business' of yours with Master Feh includes a slit throat and a hasty retreat into the night?"

"I am not an assassin, nor do I work for Dodonpa."

"Well, out with it, then," Galahad persisted. "What exactly is the purpose of your meeting with Feh?"

"That is not your business."

"All business that passes through here is our business," he responded with an attempted hint of menace.

"You will have to excuse him, milady," the black warrior said with a polite tone and a smirk. "He truly believes he is intimidating."

"That's enough, Buford," the green warrior broke his silence, his eyes fixed on Hama as they had been for a good while now. He did not know what it was about this woman, but something about her seemed... false was the best word he could think of to describe her demeanor. Most observers would believe her to look woefully ill-prepared for the dangers of the road when standing next to him and his companions. But he could tell that was not the case.

"All you must know is that I work against the wishes of Dodonpa and those who support him. If you hold no favorable view of him, you will let me pass before I lose my patience."

"Be quiet, Galahad," the green warrior said suddenly, anticipating and silencing another retort from his excitable companion. "Let her pass."

Both his companions looked at him in surprise. "Are you certain, Satrage?" Galahad asked. "We are not supposed to allow just anyone into these lands. We were stationed here for a reason, you know."

"Because no one else wanted the lower rung job of Lamakan lookout duty," Buford muttered.

"I know a lie when I hear one," Satrage replied. "She is not lying. And even if she did have deadly intentions for Feh, he can fight his own battles, and he'll be in the middle of a camp of trained martial artists. There won't be any assassinations going on tonight, I can assure you."

Galahad sighed and finally lowered his sword. "Iodem may not be pleased about this."

"Our useless commander is my concern. Not yours."

"Iodem stationed you here?" Hama asked suddenly. Without waiting for an answer, she shut her eyes and rings of Psynergy surrounded her as she began to utilize her Mind Read ability. Her eyes opened again as she looked from each warrior to the next, taking in their thoughts and memories.

"Hey! What are you doing?!" Galahad said with a jump, his earlier bluster replaced by a look of fear at the haunting look of Hama's cold stare. "Stop looking at me like that!"

"You... did see that, didn't you, Satrage?" Buford spoke as Hama dissipated her energy after only about twenty seconds and turned back around to face the other two.

"I'm not sure what I saw," Satrage replied, his fingers grazing the hilt of his sword. "But I have experienced it before."

"You are part of the Seven of Tolbi," Hama spoke softly into the sudden silence. "Great Colosso warriors who returned to Tolbi on Iodem's request to become his answer to the Veiled Sentry of Lunpa. You were sent here as part of an agreement between Feh and Iodem to watch eastern Angara for any sign of advancement of Bilibin forces. Feh is bound to keep Iodem apprised of any Bilibin activity in this region."

"How did you...?" Known for his composure, Satrage was staring at the mysterious woman in uncharacteristic shock.

"No one is supposed to know that but us and the commander," Galahad said, raising his sword once again. "You see? I told you. I told you something was strange about her!"

"And you know of Isaac," Hama continued, silencing the three men once again as she looked at Satrage. "You know, instinctively, that my power stems from the same source as

his. You do not know what it is, but you can feel it when you are in its presence. And you are part of the best that the commander of Tolbi's armies has to offer. Perhaps this meeting was meant to happen."

Satrage broke the silence. "That power just now, whatever that was. That is how you know all this, right? How did you do that?"

"I have the power to read minds, and I have read the mind of your companion. That is how I know of your secret organization."

Galahad scoffed and looked over to see his fellow guards looking not the least bit amused. "Oh, come on. Tell me you two are not buying this nonsense. Please. What kind of fools do you think we-?"

"The child in the soldier's tavern. The reason you joined the Seven, Galahad. Your left arm still carries the scars."

Galahad tensed suddenly at the words of the seer, the point of his sword hitting the sand as his arms went limp at his sides. He staggered back to rest against the rocky walls behind him. He looked up to see Hama turn towards him, her face full of pain at the visions she had seen in his mind. Visions of a young boy who had been sent to stage an attack on Tolbi soldiers under the orders of Lunpan men who had taken his mother and sister hostage, scared and completely oblivious to the fact that the explosion of the flung explosive would be large enough to kill him as well, just as it did other soldiers in the tavern. The boy's mother and daughter had then been taken away after his death, never to be found again.

"Forgive me. But now there can be no further questioning, and no more time wasted."

"What is it that you want?" Buford asked, chilled at the verbal resurfacing of a dark and cruel memory. Inwardly, he felt guilt at his earlier mocking of Galahad, understanding a little better now what must have fueled his paranoia and suspicion.

"I wish only to enlighten you of the events transpiring all around you. There is far too much to explain in words." Hama walked up to Satrage and extended a hand towards him, nodding towards the other two. "Place your hands on his shoulders. You will all understand everything in due time." Satrage reached out uncertainly, taking her hand and watching as Galahad and Buford approached, placing their hands on his shoulders, both as uncertain as he was.

"Thank you. Now you will see my mind. And you will know the truth." Hama shut her eyes and rings of Psynergy surrounded her again.

If there was to be a victory in the coming storm, Hama knew it would begin with the people of Weyard.

"Well, well... what's all this now?" A Lunpa brigand, flanked by four others, smirked and brandished his blade at the frightened, unarmed group of about eight Kalay citizens gathered together on the upper floor of a two-story house on the eastern side of the city.

"How? How did you...?" One of the men, named Lutus, began to say, before he was cut off by the sight of one person entering who was not one of Lunpa's thieves. "I-Ivan? You...?"

"I'm sorry," Ivan said softly, guiltily looking at the floor and starting to back away in shame. "I'm sorry. They gave me no choice."

"You little traitor!" Another man, Otanu, roared.

"Having a late-night rendezvous, are we? How very exciting. Why weren't we invited?" At the lack of a reply, the leader of the gang simply clicked his tongue and shook his head slowly, expressing mock-disappointment before looking at his companions with amusement. "Well, I for one think this is all just a big misunderstanding, but I want to get everyone's sentiments first. Anything out of the ordinary, boys?"

"Map of the city on the table," the largest thief in the room said, his voice rough and gravelly, and his eyes cold and discerning as he looked around the room. "Circles 'round the armory and the supply house."

"Oh dear. Quite incriminating."

"Our missing smoke bombs right over there. I knew our count was off and now I know why." The smallest thief focused his gaze on Otanu and seethed with rage, raising his blade threateningly. "I'm gonna gut you for this, you lying little bastard. A stab for every single setback you caused me."

"Scandalous."

"And a meeting that we did not know about until now, and undoubtedly was not authorized by anyone else at any time," the fourth thief to enter the room said, his voice carrying no amusement at all. It was the voice of a man who was only interested in doing his job quickly.

"A most daring play."

Ivan continued to take backward steps, a guilty expression on his face, almost obscured by the pack of thieves from the collective vision of the Kalay townspeople.

"Ivan, why...?" The youngest of the group, a teenaged girl named Akshi, asked in complete shock. The grief in her voice struck a chord in Ivan, nearly weakening his resolve, but he steeled himself.

"Now, now, don't blame him for this," the lead thief said, having the time of his life as he witnessed the outrage all around him. His eyes were slits as his voice took on a much less playful edge. "He knows his place. You brought all of this on yourselves. Did the butchering of your predecessors have so little an effect on you? Did it teach you nothing? Specifically, that this is a town of junk-peddling mongrels, and that that is all you will ever be? You will not stop us. Do you hear me? You... will not... stop us. Ever. Dodonpa has his grip on every one of your throats, and he's never letting you go."

With gleaming eyes, he pointed to Akshi. "That one stays with me. By sundown tomorrow, she'll have personally apologized to every single one of our poor soldiers for her misbehavior." He belched out a disgusting laugh. "Take the rest to the captains. We're putting on another show for the city tomorrow."

"No. Your roles in this are over."

"Agh!" The fourth thief was clubbed in the back of the head by the Dracomace, knocking him out cold to the floor. Ivan cracked the base of the mace against the largest thief's knee, bringing him kneeling down to the floor with a yell of pain. With a deadly spin of the Dracomace, Ivan brought down the larger thief and the smaller thief at the same time with powerful blows against both of their faces.

"N-no!" The leader thief had barely raised his sword before Ivan slammed his own weapon against it with such force that

the sword went flying against the wall from the man's weak grip. Ivan's swift and punishing blows against the Lunpan's legs, torso, and face were so fast that the man's eyes could barely see where the next blow was coming from before he felt it. He fell to the floor with a shattered nose, a broken tooth, and an entire body trembling with absolute pain. Ivan looked down upon him with utter disgust, not entirely satisfied, but knowing it would be pointless indulgence to further harm the waste of breath at his feet.

"Well done," Ivan said to the freedom fighters of Kalay. "Quickly, collect their weapons and tie them up before they wake up. Make sure they cannot shout for help, either."

"Better keep it down," Lutus spat at the whimpering leader on the floor, picking up his fallen blade and aiming it at the man's throat. "Anyone hears you and comes running, you'll be the first shield we use."

Otanu picked up one of the fallen blades as well before giving Ivan a smirk. "How was my acting, commander?"

"I have told you titles are not necessary," Ivan said, knowing Otanu only persisted in doing so because it embarrassed him. He then smiled. "And you were a bit over the top, but it got the job done." His smile faded as he addressed the group at large once more. "Alright. Get everything ready. I will make the last preparations and then give the signal when it is time. Take prisoners if you can, but if you must kill, do not hesitate. We cannot let a single one of them leave Kalay."

"Good luck," Akshi called out to him as he departed, the warm smile on her face bringing a warmth to Ivan's face that he quickly hid away with an abrupt turning away. Now was not the time for such things, but perhaps sometime in the

future... the near future, if Ivan's hopes were to come to pass.

Ivan calmly walked down the outdoor stone steps of the building, and then strode down the gravelly road that led him through the central square of the city, ignoring the occasional bullying comments sent his way by passing Lunpan thieves. For so long, he had played the role of the humble young sage who was fearful of the power of Dodonpa. As a result, the Lunpans did not regard him as a threat. Even those he had fought once before at Lunpa during the rescue of Hammet now believed that they had only been beaten due to the combined strength of Ivan and the powerful friends he had had with him at the time. Their ignorance would be their downfall.

But the situation in Kalay was a very fragile one that required calm and focus on his part. It was not as simple as simply starting a fight. The soldiers of Kalay that now battled Tolbi under Dodonpa's control did so with the knowledge that their families back home were under constant threat. Word traveled quickly through Lunpa's network, and it had been made clear to them that even one betrayal would lead to the deaths of all who lived in Kalay. Ivan feared a similar fate could befall the soldiers if word of Kalay's recapture reached them. Not a single one could be allowed to escape.

Ivan shut his eyes and placed the base of his Dracomace upon the ground as he entered the square of the city, allowing himself to fall into a meditative state. His nightly training was not an unusual sight for the Lunpans. In their eyes, he was a small and weak teenager who spent his free time dabbling in a strange and pointless philosophy of attaining an inner peace. Once again, it was all part of his design. This location just happened to be the best spot for

him to practice his new ability to the fullest extent of his power.

Rings of Psynergy surrounded him, unseen by the inexperienced and loutish jeering at him every now and again. If his ability could be seen in the form of energy, it would be a wave of purple Psynergetic light, the light of Jupiter, spreading out from his body and all over the city. A din of voices eventually began to assail his mind, growing louder and louder as more voices were heard every few seconds.

Within one very long minute, Ivan was listening to the minds of every person in Kalay. It was utter chaos. Every now and then he would catch just a fragment of a coherent thought before it was drowned out in the vast sea of constant voices. Once upon a time, such an achievement had been utterly painful, nearly rendering Ivan unconscious from the explosion of pain in his head. Even now, it was not the easiest task. But he had trained himself every single day in the past year in preparation for the day when he would need to make his move.

Clutching the Dracomace so hard that it hurt, Ivan felt every muscle in his body tense up as he focused his mind to block out all unnecessary noise. Mind and body ached and might have broken altogether if attempted by a far less experienced Psynergist. After about a minute, he was able to restrict his abilities to only a few select minds. Specifically, the minds of every Lunpan within the borders of Kalay.

Ivan sought out their individual locations, when the guards of the old weapon shop, now a weapon armory meant only for the Lunpans, would be absent, and most pertinent of all, where the secret Lunpa spies were currently located.

For it was not only Lunpa's brutal thieves and soldiers that had kept the city in line for so long, but the fear of the undercover spies living among the populace of the city. Their existence was not a secret, but their identities were, and it was that extra notch of hopelessness that had nearly crushed the innocent populace's hopes of ever seeing the day when Kalay would shine bright again.

In the early days of Lunpa's initial attacks, people from the weaker settlements all over Angara had flocked for the safety of Kalay, and the good Lord Hammet had granted them sanctuary. But among those who needed help were those who needed information. Information that would be concealed in letters to "loved ones" that would eventually be lost on the trail to Vault or Bilibin through mysterious means, and delivered to Dodonpa himself. Contained within such letters were various weak points in the city's defenses, areas to take advantage of in the coming attack that none but Dodonpa and his secret informants knew about. Or so the informants had believed, never considering that Dodonpa's strategic maneuvers had been orchestrated by forces far more insidious than that of a power-hungry man who held the reigns of an army.

Following Kalay's occupation, the spies had walked among the people, outfitted in ordinary clothing and working everyday jobs while being pushed about and belittled by the armored Lunpans loudly singing praises for their lord, often in plain view of the rest of the city. The underhanded tactic had worked like a charm two years prior, as sympathetic Kalay citizens offered aid to the snakes in the grass while secretly whispering to them that the city's pain would soon end, for a rebellion was in its infancy and would soon grow strong enough to bring down the tyranny of Lunpa within the borders of Kalay. And so it was that those who longed for Kalay's freedom, but were too afraid to fight, were forced to

watch public beheadings of the conspirators, the executioners warning them that such a fate awaited those who dared oppose Lunpa. In the aftermath, the spies had simply faded back into the populace to continue their surveillance.

It had been well-known that the resistance had been betrayed, for it was the only explanation, but there was no way of knowing who had done it. The bonds of trust for fellow men, something Lord Hammet and Kalay itself had been renowned for, had quickly begun to dissolve following the horrific executions. Suspicion reigned supreme and infighting began to escalate. Sometimes one of Dodonpa's secret informants would be attacked, not that the attackers could ever prove their guilt to anyone. But the majority of the time, it would simply be a senseless fistfight between an innocent and another innocent. All the while, the city's tormentors just laughed and cheered on the fights, allowing the once happy town to degenerate and bring itself down to their level.

For a year following the executions, the whispers of rebellion had ceased, and the townspeople had resigned themselves to their fates, now assured that nothing they did could escape the watchful gaze of Dodonpa. Until Ivan had come forward and begun to secretly spark talk of rebellion once more, using his powers to ensure that no one with loyalty to Lunpa would ever interfere. And so the waiting and anticipation for the coming storm had begun.

Ivan halted his technique at once as he sensed something. Something that was very far away, but becoming clearer every second. His body discerned a rush of relief as his light headache faded, but he did not focus on that for long, already seeking out the cause of the powerful bursts of energy he felt.

His eyes shot open. There was no doubt now. Isaac and Alex. The two Alchemists had finally come to blows. Ivan felt fearful for his old friend's safety, but at the same time invigorated by the incredible power he was exerting. Ivan felt his own energies rise up, and a strange excitement began to come over him.

If ever I needed some kind of sign, Isaac, this would be it, Ivan thought. Smiling despite his ever-present worry in the back of his mind, he continued his walk through the town, now at a much more brisk pace. He could not and would not stand idly by whilst a battle for the ages was raging on.

It was finally time for the people of Kalay to save themselves.

With the ensnarer of his mind now far enough away from harm, Felix had lowered his hand which had indicated clear and present danger as a response to any provocation. Both hands now held the hilt of his Gaia Blade as he watched and seemingly waited for his three former companions to make the first move.

Indeed, that was what the voice in the deep recesses of his consciousness referred to them as. Former companions, now cast aside. Unimportant. In mere minutes, entire years of experiences had been rendered nonexistent. If there even existed the slightest remnant of the former voice in his mind that echoed his speaking voice, it could not be heard over the din of what sounded like a chorus of the same voice, the new voice, speaking to him.

And yet, a voice that was not his own, discerned by his ears rather than his subconscious, could suddenly be heard over the chorus. Amazingly, it was little more than a whisper, and

thus it was almost paradoxical how easily it triumphed over the deafening and ceaseless clamor heard only by Felix.

"Felix?" Jenna was watching her brother intently. The hatred in her eyes when she had looked upon the being housed within the form of Alex was now replaced by a mix of despondency and love. Strong, hidden hope was mitigated by the ever-present sensation of futility. "Can you... hear me?"

Silence. And then, a low utterance that held the power of a roar.

"Stone Spire."

Jenna let out a scream of pain as she felt the constructs of flying chunks of stone strike her head-on, causing her to double over in pain while hearing Sheba and Piers both cry out her name in fright. With another yell, Felix once again cast his Stone Spire spell, but Jenna raised a hand immediately and screamed, *"Searing Beam!"*

Both attacks struck the other head-on. Jenna was staggered again as the stones rained down on her and brought her to the ground, but the powerful attack she had unleashed had sent Felix flying backwards off his feet, having been unable to brace himself while in the midst of his own attack. However, the attack itself had barely seemed to faze him or cause him any pain, and already he was recovering.

As Piers and Sheba came rushing forward to her, Jenna turned her head and froze the two of them with a look of anger. "Go," she said roughly. "Get out of here! Right now!"

"W-what?!" A nonplussed Sheba cried out.

"No! We can't-"

"I wasn't asking you!" Jenna shouted.

"Grand Gaia."

"Move!" Piers yelled. He instantly dove to the right out of the way of the explosion of earthen power erupting from the ground itself. In an instant, he looked up and his eyes widened as Sheba ran forward and just barely pushed Jenna out of the way, immediately being enveloped by the golden light that represented her opposing element.

Sheba seemed suspended in midair for a moment as she screamed in pain. This Grand Gaia, already a powerful spell on its own and immensely damaging to those who bore the power of the wind, felt as though its strength had been increased ten-fold, no doubt by the force that had taken Felix as its puppet. Soon, the spell dissipated and she fell back to the ground, breathing heavily as pain radiated from every inch of her body. Jenna struggled to her feet and whirled around, horrified concern in her eyes and Felix's eyes focused on her as her back was turned.

"Grand-"

"Diamond Berg!"

As Jenna rushed forward to cast Cool Aura upon Sheba, Felix was frozen in place as he was encased inside of a brightly shimmering iceberg, which was then shattered with a mighty punch from Piers. Felix staggered backwards with a slight gasp of pain, but once again recovered quickly and charged forward. The Gaia Blade and the Levatine clashed and the ground beneath Felix and Piers cracked ever so slightly from the combined burst of Mercury and Venus energies. A duel of blades began, Felix on the offensive.

Sheba sat up quickly, the Cool Aura revitalizing her strength. Clutching her Nebula Wand, she looked towards the battle and prepared to leap in, only for Jenna to grab hold of her wrist and look into her eyes with an unspoken but palpable conviction.

"No... no, Jenna! Just forget it!"

"Look at what just happened to you," Jenna growled, her hands motioning towards Sheba. "One Grand Gaia managed to damage you that much."

"I don't care," Sheba shot back, yanking her wrist away. "I've had worse and you know it. Don't worry about me. Let's just..."

"Did you forget what you said to me?" Jenna demanded, her glare hardening as Sheba met her look with one of confusion. "Before the Sanctum. That you would do whatever I asked until I forgave you. Well, there it is. Get the hell away from here right now, and I'll forgive you."

"Don't. Don't you dare do that to me, Jenna."

"Just listen to me- no, Sheba, just shut the hell up and listen! We don't have time for this! They're going to Kalay right now. Right this second! If you don't get there now, they're going to take Ivan away from us too! Do you want that to happen?"

"You know I don't..."

"Then stop talking and go," Jenna interjected, looking away towards the ongoing battle. "He's not going to go down easily, and he would just chase us and keep us from getting there in time if we all tried to escape. So one of us has to keep him busy. It has to be me." Jenna turned to look at her

friend, an unreadable look in her eyes that nevertheless shook Sheba to her core. There was no sadness, anger, concern, or anything that would be deemed a normal emotion given the circumstances. She seemed... empty. "And we both know it, don't we?"

"Jenna," Sheba whispered, her gaze falling to the ground as her entire body shook with an overwhelming sorrow. "I'm sorry. For everything..."

"It doesn't matter," Jenna said softly. "I just need you to trust me."

"*Echo.*" Calling upon one of his Elemental Djinn, ensnared by the curse as well, Felix raised his Gaia Blade to the sky as yellow particles of energy seemed to seep into the blade. With a yell of might, he pressed forward and swung his weapon, striking the Levatine and sending it flying with a blast of Venus energy, while a second blast fired forth from Felix's body, striking Piers and sending him crashing to the ground. Felix prepared to press forward with his advantage, but a fireball surrounded by a sphere of swirling wind knocked him to the side, long enough for Piers to roll away and retrieve his sword and take his place alongside his two companions.

"Piers," Sheba said, her impassive voice catching the Lemurian's alarmed attention. "We're leaving. We're going to the ship."

Piers could only look to the Jupiter Adept in utter disbelief. "What?! Sheba!"

"Just move!" Sheba yelled, turning around and sprinting towards the haphazardly constructed gate in the distance that led out of the plaza of New Vale, needing no time to plan out a route. Piers watched her for a brief second before

turning to look at Jenna, and then back to Sheba as though he had been asked to make a choice. As though his body were possessed, Piers felt himself running after Sheba while his mind was still on the battlefield behind him. It did not take long for his mind to catch up with his body's actions.

Jenna watched as Felix's eyes flickered in their direction, raising a hand towards their retreating backs, and acted swiftly. *"Dragon Fume!"*

Sheba heard the sound of Felix striking back with his own spell, and ignored every instinct screaming at her to turn around. Her vision blurred as her eyes began to respond to the tragic realization that the two people whose powerful familial bond had been a source of envy to her younger self were now locked in a life-or-death battle that both would have turned away from in an instant if only they could.

Piers too shared in the desire to not look back, lest he take in a sight too painful to bear. A burning hatred that he had never believed he was capable of was now coursing through him as he thought of the specter that had taken on Alex's appearance. In the years since the worst day of his life, Piers had come to regard the bond of family with a great respect, now that he understood all too well that one did not truly treasure the gifts life granted until they were gone. And now, on top of everything else, that arrogantly smiling fiend had torn apart the two siblings that Piers had always been proud to call his friends, right in front of him. Such a disgraceful action was a personal slight against Piers as far as he was concerned, and Alex would pay dearly for it.

The Gaia Blade and Phaeton's Blade met with such force that the sound of colliding steel rang within both combatants' ears, and both felt the vibrations of the clash resonate throughout their bodies as they held their

positions. Eyes met beyond the weapons, cold apathy on one side, utter despondency that sought to hide behind the easier and much more comfortable emotions of rage and frustration on the other.

As Jenna pushed forward and pressed her advantage, she dimly became aware that she had not felt another stabbing pain in her head from the fever that had been plaguing her for a good while now. She did not even know if it had finally left her body, or if she just could not feel it anymore.

The battle continued.

When the Lemurian ship was before them once more, Piers and Sheba wasted no time running up the ramp of the ship and onto the deck, Piers recalling the ramp as well as the ship's anchor with his Psynergy. That done, he raised a hand to the sky and shut his eyes tightly as he concentrated, seeking out a certain treasure. At that moment, somewhere far downriver, the black Lemurian orb that powered his ship emerged from a hidden underwater cove only Piers knew the existence of and made its way to the surface. As it flew swiftly through the air all the way back to the ship, Sheba saw that it was also encased in ice that could only be undone by Mercury Psynergy. In seconds, the ice dissipated, and the orb flew into Piers' hands.

"Watch the deck," Piers called to Sheba as he entered his ship and made his way down to the inner workings that granted the ship movement, the product of Lemurian ingenuity. After a few minutes, he returned to the deck and nodded to Sheba. The two then instantly channeled their powers into the orb that propelled the ship's flight. As there was only two of them, they were going to have to put every last bit of their effort into it. It was only when they finally had a reason to stop moving that they both became aware of

just how exhausted they were from their sprint. In their calm states, they also became aware of something else as they put distance between themselves and the raging battle behind them.

"Incredible," Piers said in awe, his eyes skyward as the ship began sailing through the air. "I had barely noticed it until now. Do you sense it too?"

Sheba nodded, her eyes exuding wonder as well. "Guess we know what Alex wanted from Isaac..."

Isaac leapt from column to column, his balance aided by his power as Alex sent Freeze Prism spells after him every second. At last, upon the seventh, his distraction caused him to slip ever so slightly, and that one second brought pain as icy blocks rained down upon him as he screamed in pain.

"Freeze Prism... Freeze Prism... Freeze Prism!"

Isaac clenched his teeth at the continuous pain before letting out a scream of, *"Stone Spire!"* A well-timed teleportation caused the spires to rain down on the pillar and nothing more. *"Stone Spire!"* Now Isaac was on the offensive as Alex teleported himself all around the frozen battlefield with no chance of slipping up and allowing himself to be struck by the power of earth.

Alex's eyes flashed, and Isaac found himself unable to move; he looked down to see that his feet had been encased in the ice of the pillar. With a wave of his hand, Alex directed dozens of small jagged pieces of ice to fly at Isaac. Isaac blasted several away and redirected more with wind, but more than a few made it past his defenses, and he screamed as one sliced his right cheek. He felt the blood trickle down his face as another stabbed his outstretched hand and cut

him across the arm. Isaac's eyes flashed purple and he brought down a Psynergetic lightning bolt upon Alex's pillar. Once more, he hit nothing but ice as Alex teleported away.

Hearing the sound of the teleportation behind him, Isaac clenched his eyes shut and brought down the lightning again, and both he and Alex screamed in pain. As the icy traps on his feet were shattered, Isaac tried his best to ignore the shock as he brought his elbow smashing into Alex's face, capitalizing with a spinning low kick at Alex's legs behind him, bringing him down with a slam. Isaac delivered a kick to his face while he was still down, and both Alchemists struggled to be the first on their feet. Isaac delivered another powerful kick to Alex's stomach just as Alex fired a blast into Isaac's chest. Both went flying off of the pillar.

Alex stopped falling in midair, utilizing his hovering ability as he brought himself up and safely stood upon another of his frozen columns. Shortly after, the top of a nearby pillar broke off and flew over to Isaac, catching him as he fell through the air. But almost immediately, Alex's eyes flashed once more, and the ice shattered into pieces by his command. Isaac desperately slowed himself down with wind as gravity brought him spiraling down, lessening the pain of his inevitably collision with the icy sheet.

Trying to shake off the pain of his fall, Isaac stood to his feet, feeling a hand on his shoulder before the sensation of leaving the ground was felt, and he was atop another icy structure. A Psynergy-charged fist struck him in the back, sending him flying off and towards the ground once more. Below him, what appeared to be a gigantic hand made of seawater exploded from beneath the icy layer and grabbed him as he fell, swallowing him into its being for a moment before swiftly and violently slamming him into another wall

of ice behind him. With his head free, Isaac let out a pained yell as the watery form instantly turned to ice, pinning him into place. Alex floated gracefully down upon the icy bridge he created, walking up to the immobilized Alchemist.

"This can end anytime you say, Isaac," he whispered, slamming one boot into Isaac's face, followed by a kick across his face with the other. "Do not test the patience of the water."

Kick. Isaac spat out blood furiously and tried to focus. Kick. Another painful smash into his left cheek sent his world into disarray and blurred his vision. Kick. *Just need a moment.* Kick.

"*Ground...*" The energy of Isaac's Venus Djinni seeped from his body along the ice and into Alex. Alex let out a frustrated yell as he found himself immobilized, weighted down by intensified gravity. "*Venus!*" Venus energy blasts exploded from the ocean below, breaking apart his prison and sending him falling down again, but Isaac managed to land safely this time. Alex too was only beginning to recover, and Isaac seized his chance and began to run towards the distant Crossbone Isle.

I can't beat him... not in this kind of environment. He wasn't bluffing about his mastery over water. At least on land I'll have some kind of a chance.

Isaac stopped his running suddenly as he was cut off by a wall of ice rising up in front of him, only a few feet taller than him at full height. Before Isaac could even deign crossing it, the sound of shattering ice filled the air, and Isaac was knocked forward off of his feet and painfully slammed down to the freezing sheet by another bitterly cold force. It did not take him long to realize that it was another large continuous

stream of water protruding like a viscous snake from the Karagol Sea itself, pinning Isaac down like a powerful waterfall. The frigid seawater immediately surrounded Isaac completely and cut off his oxygen. Isaac's eyes burned and his lungs ached as he was then lifted into the air, encased in a sphere of water. Isaac raised a palm and sent a desperate blast of Psynergy in Alex's direction as he stood calmly upon the ice behind him, but the watery barrier before him seemed to only extend outwards before receding back into the mass from which it formed with no sign of penetration to be found.

Alex was once again the one in concentration, his hands glowing with Mercury energy as he manipulated the very element of life itself to trap Isaac. His calm, calculating smile betrayed the sight of blood and painful looking cuts all over his face. As Isaac's thoughts raced to find another solution, his thoughts themselves were interrupted by Alex's whispered voice, discerned through telepathic communication above the faint roar of rushing water.

Earth... painful, yet forgiving. It allowed me... to live. Gave me another chance. But water? Water is unyielding when enraged. It strangles you... chokes away your breath... it mocks its own nature as the element that fuels you with life itself. It is ruthless. Cold. And most of all, it's cruel. Don't you agree, Isaac?

Alex fired a blast of lightning into the water, and blinding pain filled Isaac's senses once more as every inch of his watery prison was made to torture its prisoner. He tried to scream but all that issued forth were the bubbles that represented his slowly fading breath. Then the water around his head amazingly seemed to part away, leaving what looked like a vacant spot in the middle of the watery sphere. Isaac violently coughed out water and took in several

glorious breaths, soothing his aching lungs for the moment. The brief respite ended as the seawater suddenly crashed together over his head again, and he was once more being suffocated. Another electric shock brought forth another muted scream.

As I said, this can end any time you wish, Isaac. This battle is over. I will obviously not kill you, but I will make you suffer for as long as I have to until you see reason. Isaac was allowed to breathe again. *Just say the word, Isaac, and your suffering will be over.* Moments of silence passed as Isaac simply stared at Alex with a look of extreme loathing. *Fine.* The torment began anew. *As always, Isaac, you are the orchestrator of your own pain. And that is why, in the end, you will not survive this ordeal. Be it by my hand, our common enemy's hand, or the hands of your own loved ones...*

Isaac's eyes suddenly flashed purple, and Alex let out a sharp gasp. Isaac's voice, full of rage and even menace, spoke into his mind. *You think you're free of your own pain, you son of a bitch? Let's see how true that is. You can thank Hama later for this special technique...*

"No... s-stop!" Alex struggled to maintain his concentration enough to send another bolt into the water that imprisoned Isaac, but Isaac's mental attack was growing every second with his anger. Alex began to feel the sensation of fear, something he thought he had abandoned long ago.

His continuous gasping and shuddering suddenly gave way to loud screaming. Though Alex felt physical pain in his head, it was not what had caused him to scream. Rather, it was the horror and crushing sadness that filled his soul as terrible images assailed his mind's eye. It was like he was shifting through nightmares over and over in an endless

loop. He not only saw the images, he could practically *feel* them.

He saw himself quivering with fear, kneeling before *Alex* who stood before him with a victorious smile as his body practically overflowed with the energies of Dark Alchemy in its purest form... he saw himself on the ground, beaten and broken, as Isaac once again stole Alchemy's power from him, attaining its fullest strength with a coldly victorious smile... he saw the Wise One as clear as he had that fateful day, leering at him as a human would an ant before it reduced him to complete nothingness with a single blast of Psynergy... he saw Gareth smiling mockingly as he set him ablaze with a powerful blast of fire, Alex screaming in pain as he burned alive... he saw Mia, her eyes filled with tears and utter betrayal as she stabbed him over and over in the chest with a dagger, her screams of rage drowning out his own screams of agony and sadness...

As the false, punishing images continued, the invasion of the mind also brought forth memories that were very much real, and just as punishing for Alex as he was forced to endure each and every one. It was like they were all playing themselves out simultaneously rather than in some sequence.

He saw a young boy with blue hair, looking upon his hands in wonder as they glowed with Psynergy as a group of children played several yards away, paying him no mind... he saw the same boy walking alone in a blizzard, his eyes empty and cold... he saw an older boy with blue hair futilely trying to heal a sick and dying man with his powers; the boy did not look sad as the man suffered, but interested, as if he was observing an experiment... he saw a young teenaged boy with blue hair conversing with a young teenaged girl with blue hair; it was the first time in the series of images

that the boy had smiled... he saw the girl looking unhappy as she tried to talk to the boy, knowing it was futile as he busily and distractedly perused document after document of studies conducted by philosophers of old... he saw himself atop Mercury Lighthouse, smiling proudly and arrogantly as he explained to a thunderstruck Mia his intentions to light the elemental lighthouses... he saw himself watching Mia struggle to save a foolishly heroic Gareth atop Jupiter Lighthouse, merely acknowledging her fear and sadness before turning away...

Isaac was free. The watery sphere had broken apart and Isaac fell through the air briefly as he landed on his feet. It had only been about a minute, but for Alex it may well have been an eternity. As he took deep calming breaths and called upon his powers to warm his freezing and shivering body, Isaac simply observed the silent and shell-shocked Alex, his indifferent, calculating stare slowly turning into one of pity.

The Alchemist known as Alex, the very embodiment of pride and arrogance... now just an empty man kneeling upon a sheet of melting and cracking ice... now just a sad man lost in the contemplation and memory of a life of bitterness and loneliness... a life that had been forgotten, however temporarily, through the pursuit of a broken dream.

Now just another human being.

The ice broke apart, and the vengeful sea welcomed him. Isaac let out a short gasp, moving forward quickly as Alex disappeared beneath the surface, ready to jump in and drag him back out if he had to. But as he prepared to jump in, a blinding golden glow brightened the ocean below, and Alex suddenly began to rise up from the waters on his own, his body surrounded by a golden glow.

It was incredible what a difference one second made. Alex's broken and empty demeanor had led to his unique energy signature practically fading from Isaac's senses, as though his spirit had faded away. But one second later, and Isaac was almost overwhelmed by whatever was welling up within the other Alchemist. Alex's eyes flared golden, and a powerful wind kicked up. Cracks and fissures formed all over the icy wasteland, creating hundreds of individual blocks of ice. The ice columns began to shatter and fall as well, smashing right through the frozen layer of ice, furthering diminishing the presence of Alex's creation.

Alex looked right at Isaac, and everything in Isaac's vision blurred for a second as a Psynesergetic blast unlike any other Isaac had ever felt sent him flying. When he finally landed upon a solid surface, Isaac found that he had landed upon the sandy beach of Crossbone Isle, having been sent flying several yards. Feeling drained and exhausted, Isaac forced himself to sit up and looked ahead to see Alex slowly moving towards the island while hovering in the air, the golden glow surrounding him now instead of the usual rings of Psynesergetic that once had when he used his hovering spell. The power of the Golden Sun.

So this is the "awakening", Isaac thought to himself, almost too mystified to move. If he were fully conscious right now, he'd probably be overjoyed.

The Wise One had described this phenomenon to him as yet another side effect of being forcefully granted an incomplete portion of the Golden Sun's power, as the Wise One had been forced to do to keep Alex from attaining all of it in one fell swoop. The process put both body and mind into unnatural states, constantly trying to make up for what they naturally felt was missing. But when put through a moment of extreme emotional strain, the full extent of Alchemy's

power would awaken within the body for a limited time as the mind unlocked the latent power within. Isaac had tried for years to try and trigger an awakening within himself to see if he could control it, but he had never been able to. He had never even gotten close. Simulation of emotional strain was simply not enough.

In the back of his mind, he realized that this must have been what the Dark Alchemists had been hoping to draw out of him, so that he would be absent of all thoughts of rebellion when the Dark Curse was used on him.

Now he was witnessing it for the first time, and there was no mistaking Alex's intent as he approached. With barely any thought process occurring in his tumultuous mind, his mind and body only vaguely *remembered* what he had been doing prior to his awakening, and thus they directed his movements against his will.

He was coming to kill Isaac.

The occasional intake of breath could be heard as images and unspoken *words* assailed the minds of the three soldiers of Tolbi. Memories that were not their own seemed to pass by their very eyes.

Within their minds, they learned the basics of Psynergy, and that a group of eight young warriors had flared the four famed lighthouses of Weyard and that those lighthouses brought life and warmth to this world. Images of the two dark men and select words and conversations were made known to their minds next, just enough that the truth was crystallized in an instant that the two men who appeared within their minds were the grand architects of the war that

had plagued Weyard for far too long, and had done away with the lord of Lunpa on this night.

At the same time, unbeknownst to the three warriors, their thoughts flowed to Hama's mind, and their thoughts and experiences became known to her. To pry any deeper, to look into the very cores of their souls, and to view the essence of what made them who they were would have been all too easy for the seer and her mastery of the human mind. But with almost no effort at all, Hama took only what she knew she needed to know of them, and protected their minds from the all-seeing eye of her own. Such a violation of humanity was not only cruel, but in this case, unfair and dishonest.

Indeed she had given them the truth, but certain pieces of knowledge she held had not been imparted to them, such as the many terrible tasks she had carried out when she had still been laboring to bring the darkness to full force. Of Hama, the three men learned of her name, that she was a spy working on the same side as them, and that that was how she had come to know all the information she held. Also hidden from them was the secret plot, hidden behind the fog of war, to plunge the world into eternal darkness, and just how dangerously close the plot had nearly come to fruition throughout the years.

It was with an uncomfortable and immediate guilt that Hama withheld certain pieces of information from them, instantly reminded of the tactics of the Dark Alchemists, presenting half-truths to those they sought to take into their employ, while hiding a grander picture. But a defiant voice inside her reminded her that the Dark Alchemists had never wavered in their desires for a world enshrouded by darkness. Whereas she had returned from the black void and fought to protect the land from it.

In the end, some things were too painful to be shared, and other things were far too immense in scope for an inexperienced mind to take on so suddenly.

The empty and shell-shocked faces of the three men as her powers dissipated were enough to inform Hama that her choice had been the right one. To learn of even the most basic of concepts regarding Psynergy and the grander purpose of the four lighthouses had shaken them all to their very cores. To have looked any deeper, and to have faced and understood the essence of darkness, as she once had, would no doubt have brought torment such that they had never experienced, even in the fields of battle.

Buford broke the silence after a few minutes of contemplation. "Everything..." His fists clenched, but not in anger. "Everything was because of them."

"No," Galahad said softly as he rubbed at his temples, as if trying to ward off the visions he had seen. Buford looked Galahad's way with a questioning expression while Satrage wordlessly and absentmindedly stepped backwards and let himself rest against the rocky wall behind him. "All they did was plant the seeds. We did the rest."

"What are you talking about? Did you not see what the rest of us just saw?"

"What did you see, Buford?" Galahad said roughly. "Two wicked masterminds who must pay for their actions? Heartless monsters who must be defeated by great and noble heroes?" He scoffed and looked away, bitterly spitting at the ground. "Well, I saw two men who cut deals with ordinary people like you and me. Ordinary people who allowed the world to fall all around them while bleating on about saving the world from evil. People who played right

into their hands by being too scared and stupid to see what was going on around them."

"You're insane," Buford said, shaking his head. "I can't believe you are blaming us for this... blaming *innocents* for this."

"And do you count yourself among those innocents you speak of?" Galahad snapped, and Buford took a slight step back in surprise at the fierceness of his words. "Will you claim that innocence after sharing in complete earnest my sentiments of what I wished to personally do to Dodonpa, or any Lunpan brigands that crossed my path?" He turned to Satrage. "And what about you? Do you agree with Buford, even after expressing that whatever awaited you after this life, you would gladly accept for the crimes you have committed?"

Satrage crossed his arms and looked away. "I see both sides of the argument. Many fight because they have no choice and do not deserve condemning for that... but some things cannot be excused, and there are many who must accept the blame for that, on both sides."

"The world just... changed," Buford said softly, hoping against hope to calm the heated exchange. "Everyone just got swept up in those changes."

"It hasn't changed a bit," Satrage contradicted, one of his fists striking the wall behind him. His voice showed no signs of sadness or anger, indicating the fruits of his years of work to train himself to remain composed at all times in the field no matter the situation. But there was no hiding the weight of his words, and the toll they took on him.

Galahad nodded in bitter agreement with a wry smile that held nothing but clear and present self-hatred, which melted

into contempt as he turned to look at Hama again. "What was the point of this? Why show us these things? Did you want to bring us lower than we already were? Bring us more pain that we never asked for?! Did you just want to show us how meaningless every single choice we ever made in the past six years was?!"

Hama remorsefully stared out at the cold desert, images replaying themselves in the darkest corner of her mind. Images of the past, of all the times she had simply walked away, constantly training her conscience to feel light as a feather as she left behind souls she had brought to ruin, and threatening minds she had destroyed with the justification that it was all in service of a greater good.

A voice in her head told her there was no time for healing wounded minds, that her attempts to fix what could never be repaired were foolishly futile. Even now, she could simply walk away with the passage that had been granted to her and be done with it, secure in the knowledge that she had brought a deeper understanding to minds ignorant of the veiled events around them. Satrage had indeed been correct. The world truly never changed.

"Don't you lump me in with you and your backwards view of the world," Buford snapped, meeting Galahad's glare with his own as both Hama and Satrage looked up in surprise. "You can despair all you want, but that's not me. I reject this nonsense that we'd have been better off not knowing the reality. My reasons for doing what I do... none of that has changed at all. Those men are to blame. Not us."

"Unbelievable," Galahad remarked scathingly. "What is it going to take to wake you up, Buford? When are you going to see things for how they really are?" He turned to Hama

again. "Go on. Tell him. Tell him how we have been uselessly killing each other of our own accord all this time."

Devoid of all obvious emotion, Hama's voice broke the momentary silence. "The influence of those two men is strong, and to an extent they find ways to control the people they specifically seek out with the right words and promises... but it is indeed a part of their nature to watch and witness as men orchestrate their own downfall. When they take people into their employ, they do not threaten with torture and death for failing to comply. Or at least, they have never had to take the next step when faced with refusal. People like Dodonpa and the leaders of Bilibin and Alhafra were given a choice. Always the same choice. Join them to attain power they covet, or kill them and end their promised reign before it could ever begin. Blinded by greed, jealousy, and fearful self-preservation as they desired to hold onto a failing leadership, these leaders who should have held the lives of their people above all else in importance chose selfishly, and made themselves a part of the crime. Dodonpa is only the first to have paid for it with his life."

"These... powers you people possess must be immensely fearsome," Satrage spoke up, looking to Hama. "If two men could bring about and spread a war that has lasted for years, and even stab Dodonpa of all people in the back without a care."

"It is for reasons such as this that people who possessed our abilities remained hidden for generations from those who would not understand them, or would wish to possess and use them selfishly," Hama explained.

"Many would understand," Buford said, an almost desperate tone to his voice.

"Many more would not. It has been proven time and time again."

Buford could only sigh before looking to the ground with a sad shake of his head.

"I know what it is to lose all hope," Hama spoke with a gentleness that made all three men listen intently. "And it would pain me greatly to have brought others to the same mindset by my actions, but that is not something I can control. I offer neither comfort nor pain. Truth, no matter what form it takes, can either influence change, or bring about stagnation. It all depends on the mind that takes in that knowledge. I only ask that you consider this... right now there are people like me with great powers that go beyond the strengths of ordinary men, fighting to protect this world. And yet for all our powers, we can impact nothing without the help of the people of Weyard. It is only within the hands of people like you that change can come about. We can only show you the way. That change can begin now, but that is a choice only you can make. So I ask... will you help us?"

The ensuing silence was short, broken by Satrage. "I don't know what strength I can lend to people of such great power... but if there exists the possibility that my actions can even slightly lessen the hold those pieces of filth have on the people I fight for, I will take it."

Buford allowed the beginnings of a smirk to appear on his face. "Can't exactly follow that up with backing out, can I? Still, the sentiment is shared in full. Like I said, nothing has changed. I fight for the people of Weyard, and their future."

All eyes turned to Galahad, who simply gave a slight, curt nod in Hama's direction before looking away with a dark scowl.

"Champa is a valuable strategic position," Hama said, immediately gaining their attention. "Make no mistake, it is currently the last standing defense of Angara. If it falls, all of Angara will have been conquered, and they will then turn their attention to Gondowan and destroying Tolbi's defenses. That is why I am here, and why I wished to speak with Master Feh, to ask him to lend his aid to Champa. However, there is a new problem."

She looked to Galahad. "Forgive me for saying so, but I learned something new from your mind. At the forefront of your thoughts was the Bilibin advance scout caught by Feh's men a week ago. It is a justified concern. It is well known that Bilibin have had their eyes on eastern Angara for some time, but I had no idea they were already moving in. If word reaches Bilibin that Feh's best warriors are no longer protecting the Alpine Crossing, they will take the region in one fell swoop, even assuming Champa is held."

"And then Champa would have a fight coming to them on two fronts," Satrage mused, answered only by a solemn nod. "And halving Feh's forces would be detrimental on either front. Don't suppose you have another plan?"

"I do," Hama said grimly. "But it could potentially place us in grave danger. I am prepared to face it, but again, I would not demand anything of you three that you do not wish to be a part of." At their questioning glances, she continued. "I would ask that you bring the Seven of Tolbi to this region, to stand guard of Alpine Crossing. As I have gathered from your memories, you have been trained to your absolute limits in order to hold your own against a great number of foes."

"It makes sense," Buford said immediately, his voice that of a man tired of staying still and doing nothing for far too long. He looked to Satrage. "If we were to coordinate as we

always do with all seven of us, we'd definitely stand a good chance."

"Wait," Galahad said suddenly. "Why not simply leave Feh's men in their positions and go to help defend Champa ourselves?"

"It would take too long," Satrage said with a touch of bitterness. "We were never meant to engage the enemy directly, just stand at our posts and keep watch. Iodem believes Xian is enough to hold Bilibin in check around here, and so in his infinite wisdom he decided getting information from us in a timely manner was not a priority. Dekka is not scheduled to come meet us tonight, so we could not even meet him halfway and get the word out. We will have to make the journey all the way to Tolbi, even leaving out what troubles we may run into on the road."

"Whereas Feh's forces will arrive very quickly," Hama added. "With enough time to set up defenses. Additionally, Alhafra at present is much more powerful than Bilibin, having no enemies and no important territories to hold in Osenia, so they have dispatched far greater numbers than Bilibin is capable of sending, enough that they may possibly overwhelm you."

"Besides," Buford added, drawing eyes to him. "Our training is in stealth and surprise, to match the Sentry. Out here in the forests, we have all that we need to take enemies by surprise. Champa's physical environment would be a nightmare for us in a head-on battle that would not allow us a breath. We would either be on the front lines with no cover, or be forced to fight great numbers in the confined halls of Champa's cliff caves, all depending on how Alhafra chooses to make their move."

A short, impressed silence followed his words, and Satrage allowed himself a smile. "That's our lead scout for you."

"Alright, alright, I understand now," Galahad muttered. "You have all sufficiently made your point. But how do we know Bilibin's attack will not come too soon as well?"

"I will handle that," Hama said, her bold tone attracting three surprised looks. "I do not only possess a vivid memory of this entire region, but I possess abilities that will allow me to more easily scout ahead and impede Bilibin's progress anywhere I can. Maybe even stop them from taking action at all, although I make no promises in that regard."

"So it's a plan, then?" Buford asked, already looking ready to get moving.

"Perhaps I may once again be missing something obvious," Galahad said darkly. "But how will we explain this to Iodem? What guarantee do we have that he will give us clearance to move in?"

"We needn't inform him at all. We simply assemble the Seven out here, and to hell with him if he finds out." At his companions' surprised looks, Satrage continued. "We are not his servants. He needs us far more than we need him, and Azart, Navampa, Dekka, and Morgan are perched at Tolbi doing nothing but guarding the high captains. He will not give them any special orders without us also being there. After two years of serving alongside them, I have no doubt the four of them will come to our aid with no questions asked, regardless of Iodem's orders. This will work."

"Then let's go," Buford said, motioning to the desert before them. "The sooner, the better, right?"

Satrage nodded. "Yes. Both of you get going. Bring the others here as soon as possible."

"What about you?" Galahad asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I will also speak with Feh," Satrage replied. "As the commanding officer here, I think he will want to hear from me as well."

Both his companions nodded their understanding and immediately made their way further into the Lamakan Desert. Satrage watched them until they faded among the night, turning to Hama as soon as he could no longer see them. "This entire plan seems to hinge upon Feh agreeing to dispatch his forces to Champa. Can you really be sure he'll agree to this?"

"Someone close to me has given him her vote of confidence," Hama said softly. "I trust her insight."

"Well, then I hope she is right. Shall we go, then?"

"We shall."

Sheba felt worry grip her throat as her eyes caught sight of a huge plume of smoke now rising southward, in the direction they were headed, but far closer than their intended destination. Casting a glance in Piers' direction, it was clear to her that he had noticed it too and was struggling to keep his eyes ahead towards their destination. The smoke was nearing by the second.

"They have had no reason to attack Vault all these years," Piers broke the shared silence. "They are obviously trying to distract us from reaching Kalay by hurting innocents."

"Will it work?" Sheba asked darkly, and the two met each other's gaze, no answer in either of their eyes. As if in response to her question, the two felt a familiar presence emanating from the approaching burning village and immediately looked forward. Piers steered the ship slightly to the right to put more distance between them and Vault.

"An obvious trap," Piers remarked, eyes cold as the ice of his element. "I do not wish to leave Vault for them, but for now, it is best that we do not put ourselves in unnecessary danger."

Sheba did not respond, now sensing something else. Her eyes widened as something in her mind informed her of the coming danger, and she focused her eyes on Piers. "*Haze!*"

Piers vanished from view for a few seconds as numerous black plasma bolts struck the deck exactly where he was, passing right through his temporarily incorporeal form. Sheba screamed as another blast of lightning struck her while she was undefended, bringing her to her knees from the sheer pain.

"*Shade!*" The pain was alleviated for the moment as the Djinni's bright aura of Mercury energy protected her from the electrical onslaught, giving her time to stand up and run to Piers' side at head of the deck.

"I don't think he's going to let us refuse his invitation," Sheba said bitterly, firing numerous bolts of electricity from her Nebula Wand into the sky, just barely dissipating the next focused attack of the Dark Alchemist. "And we can't just keep defending ourselves the rest of the way there. Using up our energy for this is slowing this ship down and-damn it! *Spark Plasma!*" She fired another quick defensive

blast, less successful than the first, as a single bolt managed to strike Piers in the back.

Piers hissed in pain as he staggered forward against the tiller, and he gasped when he realized the ship was beginning to descend from his and Sheba's lack of concentration. Just a while longer and it would crash into the trees below. Focusing through the lingering pain, Piers elevated the ship again, but he was not allowed to concentrate for too long before a volley of black fireballs began to rain down upon the ship. With a yell of frustration, Piers raised one hand in the air, blasting oncoming fireballs with glowing spheres of water while Sheba waved her staff and sent some of them careening into the distance with powerful wind strikes.

"Enough," Piers yelled as he roughly spun the boat wheel to turn the ship. Sheba stumbled from the sudden change in course, quickly righting her balance as the ship began to head towards Vault to the west. Her surprise fading, it took Sheba a few seconds to realize she was not contributing her energy to the ship's flight, and that Piers was doing it himself in his anger. Noting that the attacks had stopped, no doubt because they were acquiescing to the demands of the enemy, Sheba quickly contributed her energy as well, shouldering some of the captain's burden. Piers and Sheba relinquished their control over the ship little by little, allowing it to slowly touch down upon the river bordering the town of Vault.

"One moment," Piers said, closing his eyes as the orb within the workings of his ship removed itself from its pedestal, and floated its way through the ship, doors opening on their own as it did, until it reached his hands. Encasing it in a block of ice once more, Piers tossed it overboard and let it sink to the depths, knowing it was heavy enough not to be washed

away. He was not sure if the ice would keep the Dark Alchemists out if indeed this was a plot to try and steal the ship, but it was the most he could do for now. "Alright. Let's go."

Down the ship's ramp and towards the burning town, the two did not stop running, even at the sight of the numerous corpses on the ground, until they were in the center of the village, looking all about for any sign of their tormentor. It did not take them long; standing beside the burning shop of Vault in a cloak of pure black was *Isaac*, the second Dark Alchemist. As Isaac had said, this man in black was indeed an identical twin of his, save for the eyes.

Piers and Sheba both felt a chill as they looked upon the face that belonged to their friend. The face of the man who had been their greatest source of hope after all these years was now watching them with the same dead eyes as every other living being cursed by darkness, bringing them nothing but fear as he looked uncaringly upon the town he had destroyed, and the unmoving bodies he had stolen life from.

The silence did not last long.

"Megacool!"

"Sonic Slash!"

The Dark Alchemist took off at a run, jumping and performing a front flip as he escaped the icy shards of the Megacool spell. As the Sonic Slash came flying at him next, too fast for him to dodge, he raised both hands and the ground beneath him seemed to turn black as he manipulated the physical elements of earth, and multiple layers of black rock rose up and surrounded him like a pyramid. The Wind Slash bounced off the earthen wall, not

powerful enough to break all the way through. In an instant following the failed attack, the rocky shield seemed to explode outward, sending chunks towards the two Adepts. Sheba gave a wave of her staff, blasting away the rocks in midair with a burst of wind. The rocks changed from black to brown once more as they were released from the influence of darkness.

Piers was already running forward, sword out and in the air, as he yelled, "*Froth Sphere!*"

Isaac finally spoke in a calm whisper, "*Shadow Conversion.*" The spheres of water suddenly turned black in midair and changed their course on their own, flying towards Piers now. Piers managed to dodge two before the rest struck him head on. Sheba ran towards *Isaac* at the same time, sending a blast of wind in his direction and following immediately with a Tornado spell. The Dark Alchemist spun away from the blast of wind and performed another Shadow Conversion spell, trapping Sheba within her own attack. After a few torturous moments, she was sent flying backwards, sliding along the ground besides Piers.

"Damn it," Sheba swore, pushing herself up from the ground with the help of her staff.

"He is fighting with spells we have absolutely no knowledge of," Piers said in a low voice, watching *Isaac* intently as he and Sheba took defensive stances in preparation for another attack. "And he can just redirect our attacks. "

"He can redirect our spells," Sheba corrected, taking a stance that preceded an offensive. "But he had to dodge my wind strike. Alright, then... let's see how good he is with Djinn." And she was off again, at Piers' surprise, but he recovered quickly and ran alongside her. "*Blitz!*"

As Sheba had thought, *Isaac* was forced to dodge her attack as she brought a lightning strike smashing down upon the ground where he had just been. He raised a hand to counterattack, but then took notice of Piers quickly approaching. Taking advantage of the distraction, Sheba immediately called upon the combined energies of Haze and Blitz within her.

"*Fog!*" Piers swung his Levatine at *Isaac*, now infused with Fog's power. *Isaac* was forced to counter with his sword, and the powerful blow knocked him off balance. Sheba saw her chance in that instant of an opening, and screamed, "*Atalanta!*"

Isaac only had time to look up, his face breaking into the slightest expression of surprise as the heavenly huntress was summoned from the clouds themselves, unleashing a volley of green constructs of arrows to rain down upon the Dark Alchemist. He was sent flying backwards, knocked clean off his feet by the attack. Piers wasted no time and capitalized, summoning the princess of the sea spirits with a mighty yell. "*Nereid!*"

Isaac was blasted once more by yet another summoned being, unleashing the might of Mercury upon him in a dazzling display of bright blue energy. The Dark Alchemist was sent rolling along the ground from the force of the attack before forcing himself to his feet mid-roll, clearly staggered and trying to keep his balance, but prepared to defend against further attacks. Still, the damage had been done.

"It... worked," Piers said in between breaths, amazed at the successful coordinated attack. His body felt slightly drained from the expelling of energy, but it barely registered compared to the feeling of accomplishment welling up in

him at the prospect of having brought damage upon a Dark Alchemist.

"We can do this," Sheba said, breathing heavily as well. "We can beat him."

"Perhaps," *Isaac* said suddenly, capturing their attention immediately. "But not right now." His voice carried none of the arrogance that *Alex* had practically radiated. "I was merely curious, and you have satisfied that curiosity. Indeed, if the lighthouses fail to be converted, the powers of you and your companions combined will destroy us, and quite easily at that."

Sheba and Piers met each other's confused gaze for a second before looking back at him, unaware why he seemed so calm of his own defeat, and why he was practically assuring them of victory. "It is good fortune for us, then, that your group is splintered, and that your loyalties to each other are far weaker than you believe. Or perhaps they are just as strong as you think they are, which is to say, not at all. But that is, of course, entirely up to you."

With that, he began stepping backward slowly, out of the light of the fire that cast shadows over his familiar face. Then, as he fully entered the shadows of the night, he vanished completely without a trace.

"What...?" Piers let out, surprised.

"He has the Cloak Ball," Sheba gasped, instantly recognizing the effects of the old treasure of Lord Babi. She quickly snapped out of her surprise, and raised her staff, prepared to rain down plasma bolts all over the area, before she was suddenly pushed down to the ground, Piers shielding her as a spear sailed through air above them, missing its intended target by only a second.

"Piers, what...?" Sheba started, but then she saw them. All around the both of them, Vault soldiers were beginning to emerge from the shadows themselves, some exiting their hiding places within the no doubt vacant houses of the town. The two Adepts had known what they would see in their eyes before they actually saw them with their own.

"This is why he lured us here," Piers hissed, raising his blade. "He has just been buying time. Merciless cowards, the both of them."

"Piers..." Sheba murmured, and he turned to see a horrified, disgusted look on her face. The corpses of the slain people of Vault were beginning to rise, opening blackened eyes. Forlorn moans of agony filled the air as they began to stagger toward them. The odor of fresh decay was almost dizzying.

"Undead," Sheba murmured as if to force herself to believe it. They had fought undead creatures before, but it was simple to tell that these were different.

Piers felt sickened, and the grotesquely mangled bodies and their smell of decay had absolutely nothing to do with it. "Their cruelty knows no bounds. Complete control, even in death. If we kill them, we will free them."

The words sent a chill through Sheba, and she turned her head in the direction of the settlement of Vale. *Jenna...*

"Quake Sphere."

"Planet Diver!"

Jenna avoided the rising of the earth as her own attack was cast and sent her into the air. Like a meteor, she came flying

down towards Felix and sent him flying backwards with an explosion of fire upon collision. She watched as he crashed upon the ground, and pushed away the pain she felt at the sight. *No. I can't... not anymore. It's him or me. I have to stop him.*

Jenna raised her hand towards her fallen brother without hesitation and screamed, *"Dragon Fume! Dragon Fume! Dragon Fume!"*

Felix finally let out a scream of pain as he was thrown about as three fiery dragons exploded forth from Jenna's form and struck him one after another. As the barrage left Jenna extremely drained of energy for the moment, Felix immediately forced himself to his feet and prepared himself to make his move.

It's him or me... and he chose himself for years. He always chose himself...

"Searing Beam!"

"Mold."

Jenna screamed as her own attack turned around and struck her head-on, her elemental defenses giving her no respite from the sheer pain of the powerful blast of concentrated fire. Staggered, she could not defend herself as Felix continued his offensive with Clay Spire, bringing Jenna down to her knees as the powerful constructs of stalactites rained upon her. The next words from Felix made her blood run cold.

"Geode."

Him or me... him or me...

She forced herself up just in time for the Djinni-manipulated sphere of pure earth came flying at her. With a mighty explosion, it collided with her. The sheer shock of the attack and the pain it sent radiating through her body left her numb to the feeling of crashing and rolling along the ground. It was something her mind told her she should be in pain from, but she could not even feel it.

It's him or me... him or me... him... him...

"Steel."

He was approaching now, energy seeping into his sword to deal a potentially fatal blow. Jenna struggled to her feet, only able to parry the blow with her own blade, which was sent flying away from the force. An image of the Djinni called Steel rose up from the blade and flew right at Jenna, and she screamed as she felt her own energy being siphoned away as it was given to Felix instead. She almost thought she could hear Steel apologizing to her as she grew weaker. A powerful kick from Felix knocked the wind out of her and sent her falling to the ground, feeling faint.

He used Echo with Piers... so he's going to...

And indeed, four transparent Djinni were floating around Felix as he prepared to summon Judgment, the might of the apocalypse, and the most powerful Venus-based summoning.

I'm sorry, Sheba... I tried. But you'll be... okay... without me... I know it...

Felix's energy was overflowing, and he opened his mouth to speak the words to complete the summoning.

*Besides... this is exactly... what I want... forgive me,
Sheba... Sheba... Sheba...*

"Judgment."

A memory. A light taken by darkness.

Felix said nothing as he forcefully threw supplies for the road into a traveler's pack, clearly trying to ignore Jenna's staring. The last thing he put into the pack was the mask he had made for himself in Prox all those years ago. He picked up the sheathed Gaia Blade given to him by Isaac to thank him for the Sol Blade, and fastened it around himself, the metal buckle clicking loudly.

"Tell me. Tell me why you're doing this."

Felix didn't answer. He slung the pack over his shoulder.

"What are you even planning? Taking on the entire army? This won't bring them back. You know that, don't you?"

He turned to look at her at last, fixing her with a look that held immeasurable anger, guilt, and sadness all at once. Again, he didn't answer.

"I don't want you to go."

He made his way towards the door. Once he stepped out, there was no coming back, and he knew it. Jenna moved at last, blocking him from exiting.

"Doesn't that mean anything to you? Don't I mean anything?"

If only she knew how much she meant to him. But he could not find it within him to voice that sentiment. In fact, he did not deserve to do so. It was already too late.

"Move aside."

"No."

"Move... aside... or I will move you."

Slap. Felix looked at the wall to his left as Jenna screamed. "What the hell is wrong with you?! I'm your sister! You can't just shut me out! Talk to me, damn it!"

She raised her hand to slap him again, and he caught it, the grip causing her to cry out. With a violent shove, he knocked her to the floor, and there she remained, beginning to weep softly.

Felix clutched the door handle, turned and fixed Jenna with another long stare, and finally whispered. "Don't follow me."

And then he was gone. Gone, but not forgotten.

A memory. A deepening darkness.

An arrow pierced his arm, and he let out a gasp of pain, clutching at it and ripping it out of his flesh. He cast Quake Sphere once more to buy himself some time before placing a hand over the bleeding wound and casting Potent Cure. He only barely managed to close the wound before a heavysset Lunpan soldier charged him with a battle axe. At the same time, another was approaching with a sword. Meanwhile, one of the group's wounded archers got to his feet and readied another arrow.

He was beginning to wonder what he had been thinking, challenging an entire camp of at least thirty battle-hardened Lunpan soldiers. Perhaps he had been arrogant after defeating a great many undisciplined brigands that Dodonpa had in his employ, sometimes claiming victory over groups of about fifteen. But soldiers were different. They were prepared, organized, and experienced not only in battle, but in a variety of different weapons. He had taken down at least seventeen, only killing six, but he was exhausted and quickly running low on Psynergy. His last hope for an escape was the Djinn summon he had been preparing for the past five minutes.

"Judgment!"

When it was over, he was staggering away from the campsite, as every soldier behind him was downed, but only about five more had been added to the list of dead after the desperate summoning. Nineteen exhausted and barely conscious men remained, but Felix barely had enough energy to stand, let alone drive his blade into each and every one of the survivors. Besides, he had never enjoyed the feeling of taking away life by his sword. It was more impersonal and easy to forget when a Psynergic spell took its toll. Most of the time, anyway.

All he could do now was use what little energy he had left to escape into the woods, find a hiding spot, and collapse.

"That was most impressive."

A familiar voice sent a chill down Felix's spine, and he turned to his left as a figure cloaked in dark blue stepped out from behind a large tree to make his presence known. "You'll forgive me for not stepping in, I hope. This is your crusade, after all. Not mine."

"A-Alex..."

"Incorrect, but I suppose I understand the mistake."

Felix felt his vision darkening, and he staggered backwards against a tree, sliding down and sitting upon the ground.

"Who... who..."

"Get some rest," the dark blue man said with an amused smile. "You will certainly need it to fully understand what it is I will tell you."

His mind swimming with questions, Felix slowly lost the ability to voice even one of them, and he fell into unconsciousness.

A memory. A revelation. The darkness comes to light.

"You are certain of this?" Felix asked.

"There is absolutely no doubt in my mind," Hama said, whispering to him and the others present even though there was no need. "Visions have come and gone over the past month, none of which were ever clear enough for me to draw any conclusions, but they were enough to raise suspicions. So I infiltrated the Lunpa fortress myself and peered into Dodonpa's mind, and it confirmed my suspicions. He has been their puppet from the very start. No doubt Lady McCoy and Alhafra's mayor are the same. The Dark Alchemists were the orchestrators of this entire war."

Felix's mind recalled the day he had chosen to be a part of the order of Dark Alchemy, and the words that had been spoken into his mind. 'This war is only one of thousands of inevitable wars that will now occur because of the breaking of the seal. Regardless of your intentions, this war began in part because of you. From the moment you cast the star into

the lighthouse, you made yourself a part of the crime. Who are you, then, to judge the soldiers that fight to secure their place in this inherently chaotic world? This world that you created. But it is not too late. You can change this world for the better. Unite all who fall under the great shadow of Dark Alchemy.'

"They made me believe it was because of us," Felix growled as Hama nodded, indicating a comforting solidarity. "That this was our fault. My fault. I should have killed them when I had the chance."

"We all should have," Maha said darkly. "I should have ripped their throats out the moment they approached me. The moment they gave me the opening."

"Speak for yourselves," Alex said. "I was never deceived. I knew full well that they had manipulated this war from the start. I was simply willing to play along."

"You knew the whole time?" Maha growled.

"Do not mistake me," Alex said, raising a hand uncaringly. "I am not on their side. I intend to stab them in the back when the time is right. The time is not right at the moment, so I would ask you all not to do anything rash. If not for your own safety, then the safety of those you care about."

"What are you saying, Alex?" Felix said. "What harm could come to them if we teamed up and killed the Dark Alchemists now?"

"I have nothing particular in mind," Alex said. "But they would certainly come up with something suitably horrible once, with my help, they repelled you and put an end to your delusions of heroism."

"You would stand against us?" Hama asked, her eyes carrying furious anger.

"I would," Alex replied simply and smugly. "You all are skilled in your own ways, but not even with combined strengths could you defeat me, let alone me and two Dark Alchemists."

"You worthless snake," Maha roared, his animal instincts kicking in at once.

"I am insulted," Alex said with a smirk. "I already said I desire their destruction, but I will not permit you to kill them now. Perhaps you should not have invited me to this little rendezvous."

"Clearly," Hama said with a disgusted shake of her head. "I should have put my worries aside and summoned Gareth instead. Erratic or not, he could not be any more traitorous to the people of Weyard than you."

"I am... genuinely insulted," Alex said, dark amusement filling his face. "You certainly know how to get under one's skin, dear Hama. That was the talent he sought from you, was it not?" The bitter look he received told the story. "In any case, I have said my piece. Know that I do not intend to hinder any plans you may take from here on out, as I imagine you will not be working with them peaceably any longer. But if your master plans should come down to a simple brouhaha, remember who I will stand with. Farewell." His body glowed, and he disappeared from sight.

The memories flooded to the forefront of Felix's mind. There was no stopping them. In one moment, all was becoming clear again.

An angelic knight in the sky gathered power in its shield in the form of a lion's head. It aimed the shield downward, so that the lion's mouth faced the world below, and it fired a glowing orb of energy downwards to enact its final judgment.

Jenna watched the orb descend in utter shock before she was dazzled by the brightness of the explosion, even at its distance of over fifty feet away from her, striking an empty spot of land. A huge white dome of light took shape from the explosion, but no one and nothing had been killed when the attack dissipated. The judgment was complete; a human life had been declared fit to live on.

Blinking in confusion, Jenna slowly sat up and looked towards her brother. The Gaia Blade had fallen, and Felix was clutching at his head painfully. "F-Felix?" Felix let out a short scream, and then seemed to be forcefully silenced by something, only to let out a gasp right after. Jenna's eyes widened as she realized what was happening. The cold nothingness in her heart that she had felt as she waited for death was gone, replaced by a burning fire. "Felix! Listen to me! Listen to my voice! You can win! You can beat him! Just follow my voice!"

Another voice filled the air as Felix's lips moved in accordance with the words spoken. *"You will never escape me. The darkness suffers no deserters. For your foolish betrayal, Felix, I have condemned one of you to die on this night. Who that shall be is entirely up to you. You will kill your sister... or die by my hand. Make your choice."*

Felix's teeth clenched so hard he almost felt like he was chipping away at them piece by piece. His hands clutched at his head as if trying to rip it in two, a fitting visual for the

battle occurring within his mind. "I... won't... let you... hurt her..."

"I am not the one who has hurt her, Felix. You are. And you know it. It is the reason you could not bring yourself to face her after all this time, is it not? It is the reason you betrayed her trust for years. It is the reason she was fighting you so hard. She wants you dead, Felix. Why not return the favor?"

"No!" Jenna screamed as she ran forward and grabbed Felix's shoulders, looking deep into his eyes. *"Shut up, you son of a bitch! Shut up!"* She shook Felix roughly, her voice significantly less angered now. "Felix, it's not true! You know it's not! I'm here! I don't want you dead! Just listen to my voice!"

"I won't let you... hurt her!" Felix finally screamed out, able to scream as himself for only the slightest of seconds, but it was a wonderful sensation. It was like seeing the brightest, warmest light at the end of a long dark tunnel.

"Then the choice has been made. Die in torment, you worthless deserter. Shadow Voltage!"

Felix suddenly pushed Jenna away just as black bolts of electricity sparked and crackled all over his body. He threw his head back and screamed in agony, feeling like every molecule of his body was burning. His eyes shot open as he felt a pair of arms around his neck, and screaming that tore at his heart filled his ears. *"No... no! Jenna! Get... away! Now!"*

"No!" Jenna screamed back, choking back a sob brought about by the excruciating torture. *"Not this time! Not this-aaaaaaggh!"*

"*Jenna... no! Jenna!*" With that scream, Felix's vision suddenly became clearer, only for everything to grow darker. And then lighter. The pain seemed to be ebbing away one second, only to come back in full force the next second, and then falter once more in the next. "Jenna... I can... I can..."

"Come back..." Jenna choked out, tears filling her eyes. Felix could feel them on his neck as she sobbed. "I just want to go home... with you, Felix... I want to go home..."

Felix found himself nodding along with her words as the curse began to lift. "We will... we're going back... We're..."

Alex's eyes widened in horror. He could feel his Dark Curse weakening by the second. His fists were clenched and shaking like crazy as he struggled to maintain control. He can't... there is no possible way he can... damn it all, he can't! He can't do this! I won't let him! I won't let him!

In his growing fury, he almost did not notice the strange sensation in his hands, something that stood out to him beyond the growing pain. He looked down in confusion at the alien feeling, and saw that he had clenched his fists so hard that his nails had bitten flesh and left small cuts. And from those cuts flowed blood.

Red blood. The blood of a...

Alex was silent for a few seconds, trying to keep his breathing calm and composed to no avail. In the next second, he threw his head back and let out a scream of pure, uninhibited wrath. He focused once more, his mental concentration shattering through Felix's mental walls in one second.

"Shadow Voltage!"

One second.

That was all it took.

For that one second, all the pain was gone. For that one second, Jenna thought everything would be okay, at least for now, and that the two of them had survived such a terrible ordeal. One second was all it took to cruelly give her some hope before destroying it all right in front of her.

But Felix sensed that it was not over, and in that one second he quickly shoved the unsuspecting Jenna away. Stunned, Jenna looked up at her brother, and the terrible black lightning returned, and it looked several times more powerful than before. Jenna got to her feet and made to run back to her brother again, to share in his pain, but Felix raised his hands to stop her, and a blast of Psynergy expelled from his hands, striking her and knocking her back.

Felix cracked open his eyes and watched as she hit the ground because of his attack. With the cold memories resurfacing once more, Felix shut his eyes so tightly that they might have hurt if his body had not already become a vessel of agony, and let out one final scream that told the whole story of his pain.

Already weakened by Alex's lightning, Jenna could only pull herself along the ground towards him. But her body was so fatigued that she could feel herself losing consciousness. The last thing she heard before finally passing out was that final terrifying scream followed by a cold silence.

"Felix..." Her brother's name was the last thing that escaped her lips before everything went black.

Alex sighed deeply, exhausted and angry, though his anger was steadily fading. For some reason, there was no pleasure in what he had done, as he had thought there would be. But there was no sorrow either. There was just... confusion.

He looked upon his bloody hands again and grimaced.

In that final second, he had won the struggle. He had once again proven Dark Alchemy's dominance over the human soul, and had succeeded in destroying one of the Alchemist's strongest allies. He had won...

So why did it feel like a defeat?

Felix had fallen backwards onto the ground, staring up at the dark, cloudy sky. Cold droplets of water splashed upon his face, reminding him of the night when it all began. The night his fate had been sealed forever. For the briefest moment, the clouds seemed to part, allowing him a view of the stars beyond, and he marveled at the light they brought. The light in everlasting darkness. He very briefly wondered why he had never stopped to take a look at them more often.

As the raindrops slowly grew in intensity, Felix slowly became aware of a growing sense of exhaustion, a reprieve from the cold numbness he had felt while his mind was clouded by shadows seemingly too deep to penetrate. Shadows his sister had helped him break through, if only for a few wonderful moments. As he felt his strength fade, the transparent forms of his Venus Djinn suddenly floated out of his body and departed, each flying in a different direction where they would materialize again, completely alone and without their companions. He could almost hear their voices in the air and beyond the trees and mountains, bidding him

the fondest farewells and the most tearful lamentations. Realization began to dawn on Felix.

"Jenna," He spoke aloud, his tired voice barely above a whisper. "Wait... I'll take care of you..."

He used what little energy he had left to lift his head, wanting to see his beloved sister again. There was so much he wanted to say. So much to promise. So much to apologize for. "I... I want to stay... I'll stay... I don't... want to leave you... I won't leave..."

As he looked over her, the blackness of his eyes slowly began to fade away, revealing his natural brown eyes. Keeping them open was an agonizing task, and the falling water was stinging his eyes. But he would not close them. Then he allowed himself the slightest of smiles.

"I know... we'll go on that... trip you wanted..."

Felix saw the images playing in his head. He saw the two of them laughing with the rest of their friends while Piers' grand Lemurian ship adorned the bright blue waters of the sea that they had all traveled once before. There was not a sign of sadness on any of their faces. A bright sunrise was on the horizon, casting dazzling reflections upon the surface of the great sea.

Jenna had her arm affectionately wrapped around Sheba's shoulders as the two friends chatted loudly. Piers simply gazed out to the sea he loved with a look of wonder on his face. Gareth was there as well, joking about something with Isaac, who laughed as Gareth held him in an embrace, ruffling Isaac's hair. Ivan was embracing Hama, telling her he would return soon, smiling as Feizhi assured him she would look after his sister. Beside them, Feh smiled and nodded, having long since given his blessing to his daughter's happiness.

Even Alex was there, apart from the others and looking away almost sadly, until Mia approached him and placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder, prompting him to look at her with the beginnings of a smile.

And then they all turned to look at him with welcoming smiles and enthusiastic beckoning as he approached. Their true final adventure awaited them. No war. No pain. No destruction. All was at a balance. The world awaited them.

Then they set off. They visited a revitalized Lemuria, full of the life, creativity, and inspiration of old. A happy and bustling Daila, followed by the promised reunion with their friends from Madra. They even visited a growing and prosperous Mikasalla, where several villagers recognized their faces, and were overjoyed to see their small town had not been forgotten. They saw the Great Gabomba again, no longer a figure of fear to them, and Kibombo was enjoying a time of great peace and happiness. Shaman Village greeted them like heroes and champions of old come to life. They stayed for a day at the Apojii Islands, and looked out to the beautiful Aqua Rock on the horizon. They marveled at Gaia Falls, no longer a symbol of impending doom. From every town to every tiny islet, they traveled on and indulged in the memories of the adventure of a lifetime.

"See? You'll have fun... we'll visit... all those places... again..."

Felix once again laid his head back on the freezing ground, no longer feeling even a semblance of pain. The growing numbness was back, but his mind was no longer in turmoil. He was still smiling, seeing the waters and the places of his memories. He could almost feel the warmth of the bright sun even as the rain struck his body. Logic informed him somewhere in the back of his brain, where uncontrollable

thoughts emerged, that it was not real. That he could not actually feel what he thought he felt.

But it was enough. It was enough.

Felix shut his eyes, finally giving in to the growing exhaustion. "Can you see it, Jenna? It's beautiful, isn't it? I'll take you... I'll take everyone... in a while... I just need... some rest. I promise. I'll stay. I'm not going. I'll stay."

A silence met his words. His eyes opened and the sky blurred. The warm wetness on his cheeks was almost a welcome comfort from the rain.

"Don't follow me..."

Then he said nothing else. He stared forever at the sky as the light of the stars was concealed by the black clouds once again. The silence would not be broken again until Jenna opened her eyes, unaware of the promises that Felix had made in his final moments.

The passing of Weyard's savior did not go unnoticed. His final burst of energy had been such a painful and intoxicating sensation of pure loss that even those whose senses were not attuned to his presence could faintly feel it. And now all they felt was a cold emptiness as the energy faded away into nothingness.

Hama stopped her running to Alpine Crossing immediately, shivering violently. Satrage turned around to look at her, confused. "Master Hama... what is the matter?" She did not answer. She could not answer. It hurt too much to speak of it.

Ivan drew in a breath at the sudden sensation, tightly gripping his Dracomace. With an enraged expelling of

breath, he charged the unsuspecting Lunpan men. And so the war of Kalay had begun.

Mia collapsed to the ground, ignoring the freezing snow. Her sobs were drowned out by the storm. After a few seconds of grief, she looked up in the direction of Bilibin Cave, and she forced herself up to her feet as her tear-stained eyes exuded a burning fierceness.

Garet fell backwards against the wall of the Bilibin Cave and slid to the ground, his eyes empty. "Felix..." His voice echoed in the caves. It would take him a long while before he forced himself to get back up again. "I should have been there. I should have..."

Piers felt frozen in place while Sheba let out a scream and slammed her staff into the ground, creating a ring of Plasma spells to blast the enemies all around her and Piers. It was not enough to down them all. Not even close. But it was enough for the two of them to gather themselves. Piers ran forward with his sword raised, tears rolling down his cheeks for the first time in six years. Sheba ran in the opposite direction to battle the other half of the enemy group, still screaming in fury, and not just for Felix.

When Jenna awoke, she pulled herself along the ground towards Felix, shaking him repeatedly with one hand on his left shoulder. "Felix," she spoke weakly into the night, an old memory playing out before her eyes of the times when they were children, and she had tried to convince Felix to come home, and he had pretended to be asleep just to annoy her. "Felix, come on. Stop pretending. Let's go home, okay? Mom will be mad if we're late. Come on, I'll tickle you, stupid. We can't play anymore. Let's go. We need to go home..." She moved closer to see the telltale smile he had always had during his fake sleeping was not present. Jenna rested her

head against his chest. His lack of a heartbeat tore hers in two. The memory faded. A sound in the distance was heard, and she looked up from her brother's fallen form.

The Dark Murder was approaching her.

Isaac hit the ground rolling after another powerful attack from Alex, a combined blast of ice and lightning Psynergy. The blue-haired Alchemist walked like a possessed man into the forest of Crossbone Isle, not looking directly at Isaac or even in his general direction, yet knowing precisely where he was.

Isaac still felt the burning sensations along his skin, as though jagged bits of ice and crackling electricity were lingered within his skin. He was not sure how much longer he could go on before the blasts took the ultimate toll on him. He had tried everything. His every attack had been deflected. His mind blasts had all been repelled.

In desperation, he recalled the faces of his friends, his father, the townspeople of Vale, the people of Weyard he had met throughout the years... the people who needed him the most. But no matter how hard he concentrated, the change would not occur. The transformation he knew he needed would not come about. It was hopeless.

Alex stood before him, only a few steps away. Isaac let out a yell and stood on his feet once again, firing a Psynergetic blast at Alex. Alex did not budge a single step backwards. His eyes flashed, and Isaac slammed into the tree behind him with such savage force, he felt like he could not breathe. With cold indifference, Alex raised a single hand, and jagged bolt of electricity fired forth, continuously running through Isaac's body as he screamed. It was the killing blow.

The pain was unbearable.

It was then that the sensation carried by the final torturous moments of one man's rebellion made its presence known to him as well, so powerful that it was easily recognizable to Isaac through the constant pain and the tumultuous energies being generated by Alex all over the island.

Felix.

The Sol Blade he still carried felt a million times heavier now.

"This is your quest now, Isaac. I'm just doing what I can to help out." Isaac gave the smiling Felix a knowing smirk, and accepted the sheathed Sol Blade with a nod of finality.

The pain was unbearable.

Felix was gone. Jenna distrusted him. Garet wanted him dead.

And that is why, in the end, you will not survive this ordeal. Be it by my hand, our common enemy's hand, or the hands of your own loved ones...

The pain was unbearable.

Felix. The boy Isaac had befriended during his childhood, the teenager he had hated and then treasured as a friend once more when all the misunderstandings had been cast aside, and the young man who Isaac had once again turned his back on in pursuit of a greater good.

You will not survive this ordeal.

Felix. The young man who, Isaac knew, wanted nothing more than to be with his sister after five years of suffering; five

years of battling the feelings of dejection that had taken root deep within the teenager who had returned home six years ago, and had never once let go of him.

The pain was unbearable.

"This is your quest now, Isaac."

Felix. The doomed man who had now been executed, punished entirely too much for the mistakes of his younger self, reeling from the pain of experiencing the cruelty of the world.

"I'm just doing what I can to help out."

Felix. His friend.

Alex was blasted right off of his feet by an explosion of Psynergy. The forest filled with a golden glow as Isaac stood up at last, no thoughts in his mind any longer as the Golden Sun flowed through his body at full potency. The tears that continued to fall from his eyes floated into the air and dissipated from being in the presence of such magnificent power. Alex stood up as well, challenging Isaac's aura with his own. The Karagol Sea itself amazingly seemed to recede from the island as their energies came into contact with each other, creating a shockwave along Crossbone Isle.

With nothing left but the instinct to battle, the two Alchemists flew against each other. Rapid punches and kicks were thrown, teeming with elemental energy. Each landed blow created a small quake. Energy blasts destroyed trees and created trenches along the ground. Full blown tornadoes took form all across the island and trees were yanked out of the ground and sent flying. A sandstorm kicked up at the same time as tidal waves, brought to existence by the terrifying earthquakes being caused by the battle, crashed

upon Crossbone Isle, not affecting the two Alchemists in the slightest as both continued to uncaringly destroy all that was in their path for the singular purpose of bringing the other down... for good, if necessary.

And then, at long last, fate made it known that the battle of the Alchemists was to come down to one final moment. Alex and Isaac stood twenty feet away from each other, knocked away by two simultaneous blasts of energy. Both put both of their hands close together, focusing every last bit of their power into the space between. Two dazzlingly white orbs took form as the Alchemists both combined all four elemental energies into one focused blast. It was impossible to know which of them had moved first. In one instant, they faced each other. In the next, they were both running forward. The two orbs met together and all seemed to go completely and deathly silent for a second. The second passed.

An explosion of white light. Weyard was illuminated.

The lighthouse of Dark Alchemy stood strong through it all, an immovable object amid the earth-shattering, sky-rending maelstrom.